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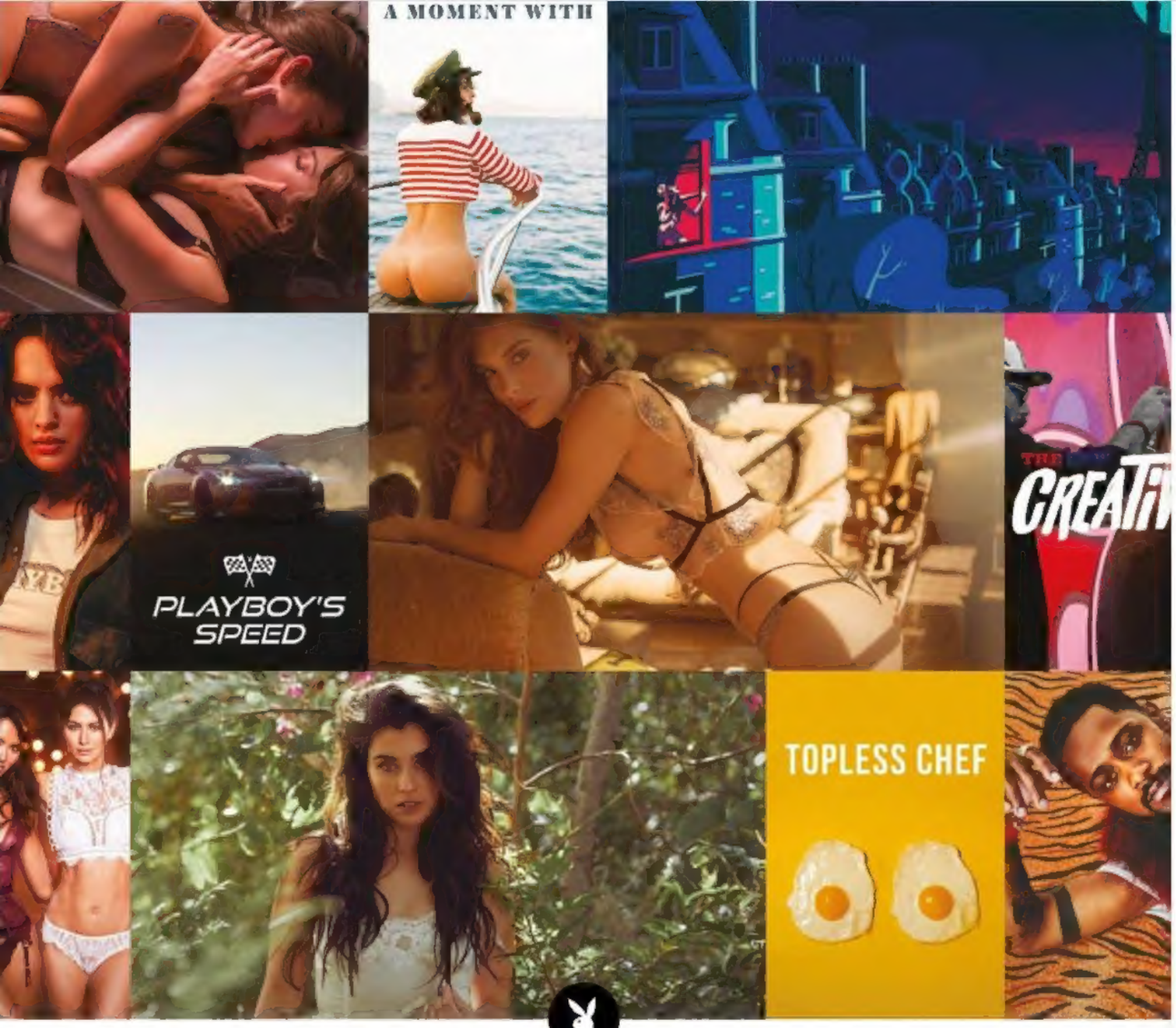

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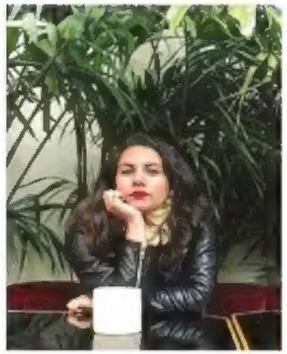
PLAYBILL

DAVID GILBERT
"What happens when a narcissist awakens to find herself invisible?" That's just one of the questions Gilbert explores in We Are Not Here, a short story that delves into the psyche of a fading starlet who must confront a specter from her past. Gilbert, whose writing has appeared in The New Yorker, Harper's and GQ, is the author of three books, the most recent being & Sons. He is currently working on a new novel for Random House.



MARIA DEL RUSSO
In an era of ascendant sexual fluidity, gender-swapping the voice behind our signature and historically male-penned Advisor franchise was an organic decision. "It was definitely daunting, but I've always strived to discuss sex in a frank and positive way for everyone, regardless of gender expression," says Del Russo of taking on the role. In addition to PLAYBOY, Del Russo has written about sex and relationships for The Cut, Men's Health and The Washington Post.

MARCUS REEVES
Two weeks before hitting the Super Bowl halftime stage with Big Boi, Travis Scott joined a different hip-hop legend—the one and only Nas. Reeves, a reporter on music and youth culture for 20-plus years, moderated the PLAYBOY conversation. "A main talking point was no matter how different this era of hip-hop is from those prior, the music's message is still the same," says Reeves. "It's about representing unheard voices of American youth."

Luis Gomez
An internationally renown photographer, producer, editor, videographer and musician, whose work is published worldwide. Luis Gomez is known as a guitar player and exclusive artist signed by Gibson guitars and producer and filmmaker. Luis Gomez is the CEO of Universe 137 Studios And Chicas Universe 137 working with more than 40 magazines.

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Nataly Correa,
Photography by Victor Kenzo
No 24 June 2019

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EILEEN *Kelly*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DANA TRIPPE**

CENSORSHIP. SPECTRUMS. CONSENT. THE NEXT SEXUAL REVOLUTION IS UPON US, AND "THE TALK" NEEDS TO BE REVISITED. WHO CAN WE TRUST TO LEAD THE CONVERSATION? MEET AMERICA'S NEXT SEX (ED) SYMBOL

BY
ANITA LITTLE

It began with a kiss, as so many sexual awakenings do. Eileen Kelly, who attended Catholic schools in Seattle and comes from a devoutly religious family, still remembers how she felt when a teacher humiliated her for kissing a boy. "I was in third grade, I think, and it was just a peck on the cheek, but it had a lasting effect," she says. "Shame was just so deeply rooted in how I grew up."

Now 23, Kelly straddles the millennial generation and the coming-of-age Generation Z, a position that makes her one of the freshest faces in the movement to guarantee every person in this country access to a sex education that's inclusive, gratifying and medically accurate. She wants her generation to participate in more honest conversations about sexuality, enter relationships with more realistic expectations and help demystify the stigmas that burden so many sexual curiosities and subcultures.

"The sex ed we wish we had" is the simple but purposeful mantra of Kelly's brand, Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has exploded on Instagram and, since 2016, as a lifestyle website that publishes such pieces as "What Does Consent Look Like?" "Intro to BDSM Toys," "PrEP 101" and "How Porn Has Affected Millennial Sex Lives." Killer and a Sweet Thang launched as a Tumblr blog focusing on Kelly's own sexual misadventures, but she soon realized first-person sexcapades weren't enough.

"The defining moment," she says, "was when I realized I was sharing only one perspective, which was a narrow one — that of a white woman who lives in a big, liberal city. I've always had access to health care, for example. If I wanted people to come to my website and be able to learn and connect, it needed to be intersectional. I needed stories across the board."

Today, more than 100 people contribute stories to Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has spun off into another, more editorial-focused Instagram account, @birds.bees — the inspiration for Kelly's PLAYBOY shoot. Accompanied by GIFs, erotic photography and an unrelenting direct ness, Killer and a Sweet Thang's articles, columns and social posts target young people who may find technical writing or government-provided information about sex too polarizing, out of touch or impersonal.

Killer and a Sweet Thang's popularity couldn't be rising at a better time. "Sexual expression feels under fire," attests Kelly, who currently lives in New York. In December, Tumblr initiated a ban on all adult content in response to allegations that the platform had unwittingly hosted child pornography. Two months prior, sex-ed site o.School published an open letter calling out Apple's new iPhone iOS 12, alleging the software's parental controls blocked searches related to sex education, safe sex and masturbation. YouTube has similarly

been accused of blocking L G B T Q content. With no consensus among tech companies and social media platforms over how to host educational portrayals of and discussions about sex, openness around the topic is becoming harder to accomplish even as the world becomes more connected.

Not that learning about sex in America has ever been easy. When most Americans think of sex education, they often picture a gym teacher listlessly pointing to parts of the reproductive system on a whiteboard. (Mean Girls's oft-quoted "Don't have sex, 'cause you will get pregnant and die!" scene comes to mind.) And with sex education not required in 26 states, many people recall nothing at all.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 27 states and the District of Columbia mandate that public school sex-ed programs, when provided, fulfill "certain general requirements"; of these states, only 13 require that the content be medically accurate. Overall, only nine require that discussions of sexual orientation be inclusive. Since sex education falls under states' rights, policies vary widely. While California mandates that syllabi cover contraception, Texas stresses abstinence, despite research that proves abstinence-only teachings are ineffective.

Kelly, who remembers first learning about STIs from an uncertified health teacher, says she has been fighting to reverse this culture her whole life. "It wasn't even the lack of education for me," she says. "It was the lack of conversation happening in family units, in the community, amongst peers. It was a very hushhush bubble I grew up in."

Kelly lost her mother before reaching her teens. Lacking the person most young girls turn to with questions ranging from how to use a tampon to how to tell if you're in love, she was raised by a single father in a household of boys. Having to navigate the rough waters of puberty without a maternal figure sparked Kelly's precocious curiosity about sexuality and her resolve to embrace the awkward questions whispered at sleepovers and in locker rooms.

"Pleasure, safety, consent — these are conversations that should happen really young, way before a sexual-health class," she says. "Even in most comprehensive sex-education courses in the United States, pleasure is left out of the equation."

Combine the dearth of reliable information from schools, the ease of accessing X-rated content online and parents' enduring discomfort with having "the talk," and you're left with a generation learning about sex from peers, porn or pop culture. It shows: Among industrialized nations, the United States has some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancies.

Compared with countries like the Netherlands, where sex education begins as early as kindergarten, America is behind the times. Kelly knows we can do better.

"Your brain is the most powerful sex organ. That's why the internet — this safe, anonymous place where people go to figure out their desires — is such an important part of learning about sex," she says.

That may be why we've also entered the age of the so-called "sexpert," a time when you can barely go online without scrolling past a sex shaman who promises to coach you to a more perfect orgasm. The problem: Many of these "sexperts" — including porn stars, YouTube personalities and podcasters — have no formal backgrounds in sexology. This has caused a schism in the world of sex education, with trained educators voicing skepticism of selfdescribed
experts who may be more eager for followers and sponsorships than for bringing the next revolution. Until she recently completed coursework in sex education from the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, Kelly had no sex-ed certification, and she notes it was a point of criticism for her detractors.

"When I was studying and not certified yet, I felt that friction. And that credibility is absolutely needed. You wouldn't take your car to get serviced by someone who wasn't a mechanic," she says.

In person, she appears every bit the embodiment of her online self. With her wide green eyes, cherubic face and soft voice, she may be easy to underestimate. But after a few minutes of talking with her, it becomes clear how she has built a legion of young followers who see her as a reassuring voice amid a confusing, hormone-laden minefield. Indeed, with more than 400,000 followers, Kelly's personal Instagram feed remains the draw, and it would be foolish to ignore its genius. Part sex-ed course, part personal diary, with plenty of pouty, lingerie-clad selfies in between, the @killerandasweetthang account is the visual analogue of the sexually curious and expressive 20-something. Of course, none of it exists without hardship — Kelly has been targeted by trolls and criticized by family members, and when she goes home, "people still don't understand what I do" — but she nevertheless hopes her work can change how all people approach sex.

For now, with the culture warz droning on, there will be no shortage of those who want sex to remain an inscrutable mystery, reminding us of America's puritanical origins. For the rest of us, there's Eileen Kelly, ready to drop some carnal knowledge on anyone willing to learn. ■

BURN NOTICE

THE ART OF THE CLAPBACK

Protest art has never been so visible or so damn amusing. From wordplay on placards at #Resistance marches to Cardi B blasting Republicans in a freestyle on the recent government shutdown, schooling the ignorant without relying on insults is an art form. (Our president wouldn't know that, of course.) Amid the shouting matches on social media, the clapback has emerged as its own genre of commentary among public figures. Derived from Ja Rule's 2003 song of the same name (meaning to "shoot back"), it has transcended the internet and entered the real world; Nancy Pelosi's gesture toward President Trump at the 2019 State of the Union was viewed as its farcical embodiment. In honor of *Merriam-Webster*'s adding the term to its dictionary this year—definition: "A quick, sharp, and effective response to criticism"—we ranked some of our favorite slights. Enraged by our selections? Clap back at us on Twitter and Instagram: @Playboy.

@AOC *vs.* AARON SORKIN

"Ever wonder how expression that's feminine, working-class, queer or POC isn't deemed as having 'gravitas,' but talking like an Aaron Sorkin character does? Men have 'gravitas,' women get 'likeable.'"

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, equal-opportunity dragger. In January she joined Human Rights Campaign spokesperson Charlotte Clymer in questioning the liberal screenwriter's call for young Democrats to "grow up."

@KINGJAMES *vs.* @REALDONALDTRUMP

"U bum @StephenCurry30 already said he ain't going! So therefore ain't no invite. Going to White House was a great honor until you showed up!"

LeBron James's sportsmanlike behavior, in defense of fellow NBA champion Curry, whom the president disinvited from the White House, made headlines around the world and became one of the most popular tweets of all time.

@CHRISSYTEIGEN *vs.* @GORGONFREEMAN

"I have a best-selling book, great boobs, a family I love, am literally eating pasta on a lake in Italy and I married rich."

How ruthless is Teigen on Twitter? Ruthless enough to have been blocked by the president. When a user suggested she had peaked, she replied with a reality check.

@IAMHALSEY *vs.* @TIMURMENGLI

"Yeah, it's crazy. I can show my tits in PLAYBOY, perform at the Nobel Peace, speak at the Planned Parenthood gala with Hillary Clinton, shake my ass on 300 stages, give a speech at the United Nations, do 150 shots of tequila, get a #1 album, and march in the streets of DC all in just one year!!!! Newsflash. A woman can be multi-dimensional."

We admit we're biased when it comes to Halsey and her response to a dude who suggested feminists shouldn't be photographed naked. A little louder for those in the back.

@MOONPIE *vs.* @SIGURBJORNL

"Buddy it's Saturday night and you're talking to a marshmallow sandwich on the internet."

In 2017, the snack cake hit back at a hater. No joke. Junk food companies that bicker with people on the Internet have become hilarious, existential reflections of society.

@JK_ROWLING *vs.* @OMFGNN

"In - Free - Countries - Anyone - Can - Talk - About - Politics. Try sounding out the syllables aloud, or ask a fluent reader to help."

The woman behind the best-selling book series of all time gave a civics lesson to a Muggle who told her to "stay out of politics."

ILLUSTRATION BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

ULTIMATE BARTENDER CHAMPIONSHIP

Lucky Shaker keeps the crown in Monkey Shoulder's Ultimate Bartender Championship for 2019

It was time again to cast off the shackles of the cocktail shaker, time to say "YES!" to the jigger, to the stirring, to the mastering, and time to rise up to the challenge and declare the king of bartending skills in the 2019 Monkey Shoulder Ultimate Bartender Championship (UBC).

This year's Ultimate Bartender Challenge, which took place at Saigon Suzy in Johannesburg, South Africa saw some of the regions best bartenders battle it out to be crowned South Africa's ultimate bartender and win an all expenses paid trip to the London Cocktail Week in October, 2019.

We've all heard the saying, "don't let the same dog bite you twice", but in this case, the same man has claimed the UBC title for a second year running - Michael Stephenson, owner and bartender at Lucky Shaker Cocktail Bar in Umhlanga (and more recently also in Ballito). Justin Bester from Sin + Tax came in second place, with Pieter Oosthuizen from Kegtails taking the third position – both from Johannesburg.

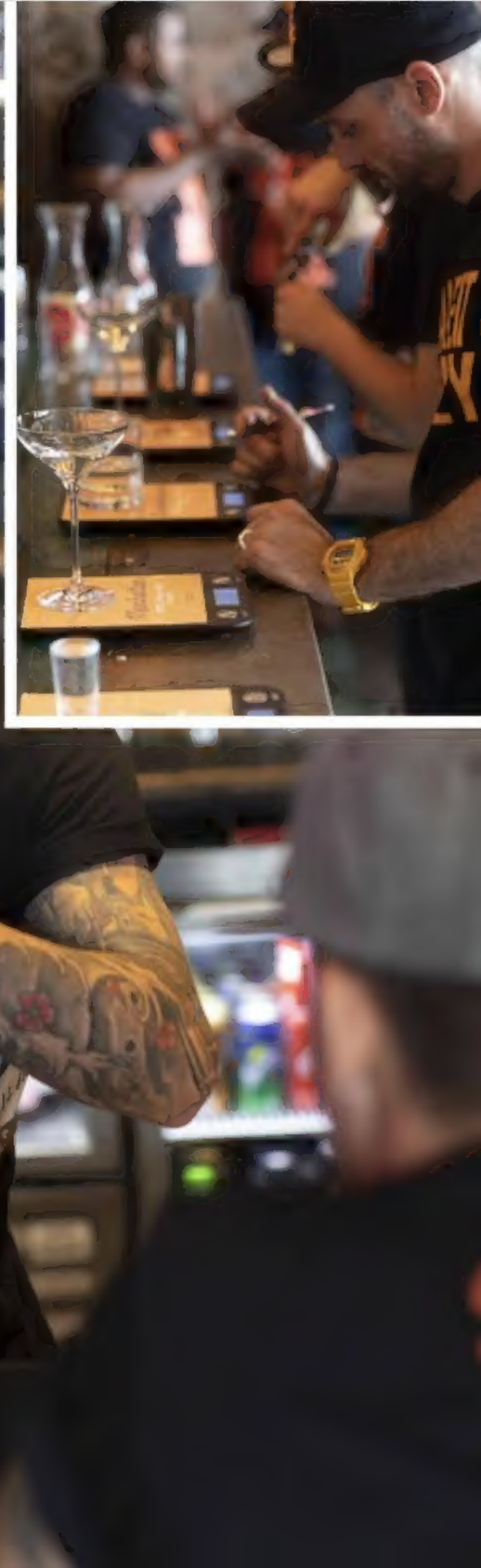
Joe Petch, Global Brand Ambassador for Monkey Shoulder, explains, "The Ultimate Bartender Challenge has been running for over six years globally and gives bartenders from each region the spotlight they thoroughly deserve. It is evident from the scores and flair witnessed at the 2019 South African championship that there are some undeniably talented and passionate bartenders in the region."

UBC is an unconventional bartending championship, with a series of rounds aimed at testing all the skills that make a bartender extraordinary. The participants were put to the test and quizzed on everything from industry knowledge, pouring and nosing, and costing and creation, to tray service. The final challenge saw the top three contenders competing against the clock to serve as many drinks as they could from the tabs provided, accurately.

"While there can only be one winner, the talent on show and the pioneering of drink making techniques were next level in terms of creativity and obvious passion. We congratulate Mike for reigning victorious, and applaud all the bartenders that competed in the championship," says Shaun Stemmett, Brand Manager for Monkey Shoulder South Africa.

The competition is kept fair by not including any judges, only referees, who keep and tally the scores. The other participants even get a chance to be part of the process, assisting with the scoring of taste and technique in the last round.

"In South Africa specifically, the trend towards the creation and consumption of cocktails is being driven by the most passionate mixologists and bartenders. In this up-and-coming cocktail market, it always takes a few individuals to create a big difference and it is evident by the type of people entering the UBC that this trend is set to continue. Globally, the talent in South Africa undoubtedly measures up to that of many places in the world where we run UBC. The leading trend the world over is that customers demand incredible quality and this means that the bartender skillset continuously has to evolve and improve – and this is true in South Africa, too. This is exactly what the championship is about – identifying skills and bettering them," says Petch.



As the worlds best selling and top trending Scotch whisky – as voted by Drinks International for three years running – Monkey Shoulder declares itself free of the stuffy protocol for enjoying Scotch whisky. It advocates the exercising of your right to drink malt whisky in cocktails and admiring your mixologist-made concoctions. Throughout the world, bartenders participate in the UBC designed to test skills that pay the bills and prove their competency in all aspects of what it takes to be a top bartender. Until next year!

ABOUT MONKEY SHOULDER

Monkey Shoulder is the world's first 100% malt whisky made for mixing.

Using batches from just 27 casks, Monkey Shoulder is created by combining single malts from three of Speyside's finest distilleries. Known for breaking conventional whisky rules and traditions, Monkey Shoulder puts the fun back into whisky drinking. Famed for its versatility, the smooth and rich taste has hints of mellow vanilla – a flavour which works well with mixers and when included in cocktails.

The term 'monkey shoulder' harks back to whisky making heritage. It's a reference to a condition that malt men sometimes picked up while working long shifts, turning the barley by hand. It had a tendency to cause their arm to hang down a bit like a monkey's, hence the nickname 'Monkey Shoulder'. Thankfully practices have changed and the condition no longer exists! ■

Coco

Photography by **BRUCE COLERO** *Shoot Assistant* **DANIELLE HAWKINS**
MUA **KYLE MCKELLAR**

Describe yourself in three words
Sexy, 'nte ligent & funny

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I th nk excited is a comp ete understatement. It's a rea life dream come true for me!

What was it like starting out as a model?
When first started out t was kind of rough find ng my p ace in the industry. I went from be ng 18 and 5'9 and 120 bs to 140 and a fu grown curvy woman. But once found my p acing everything fe into p ace.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
I th nk the biggest cha enge for me is constant y staying re evant. You have to stay current with socia media and a of the different sty es of shooting and what's new and trend ng. We ive in a social media age where trends change every minute.

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
My perfect day off is waking up late cutt ng off my phone and going on adventure 'm a Co orado girl we ove sunshine and good hikes.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I'm definite y a cross bread ove be ng n the city but also love be ng in the mounta ns

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
I wou d love to be anywhere with my oved ones, but f it had to be a phys ca place, I wou d say Greece.

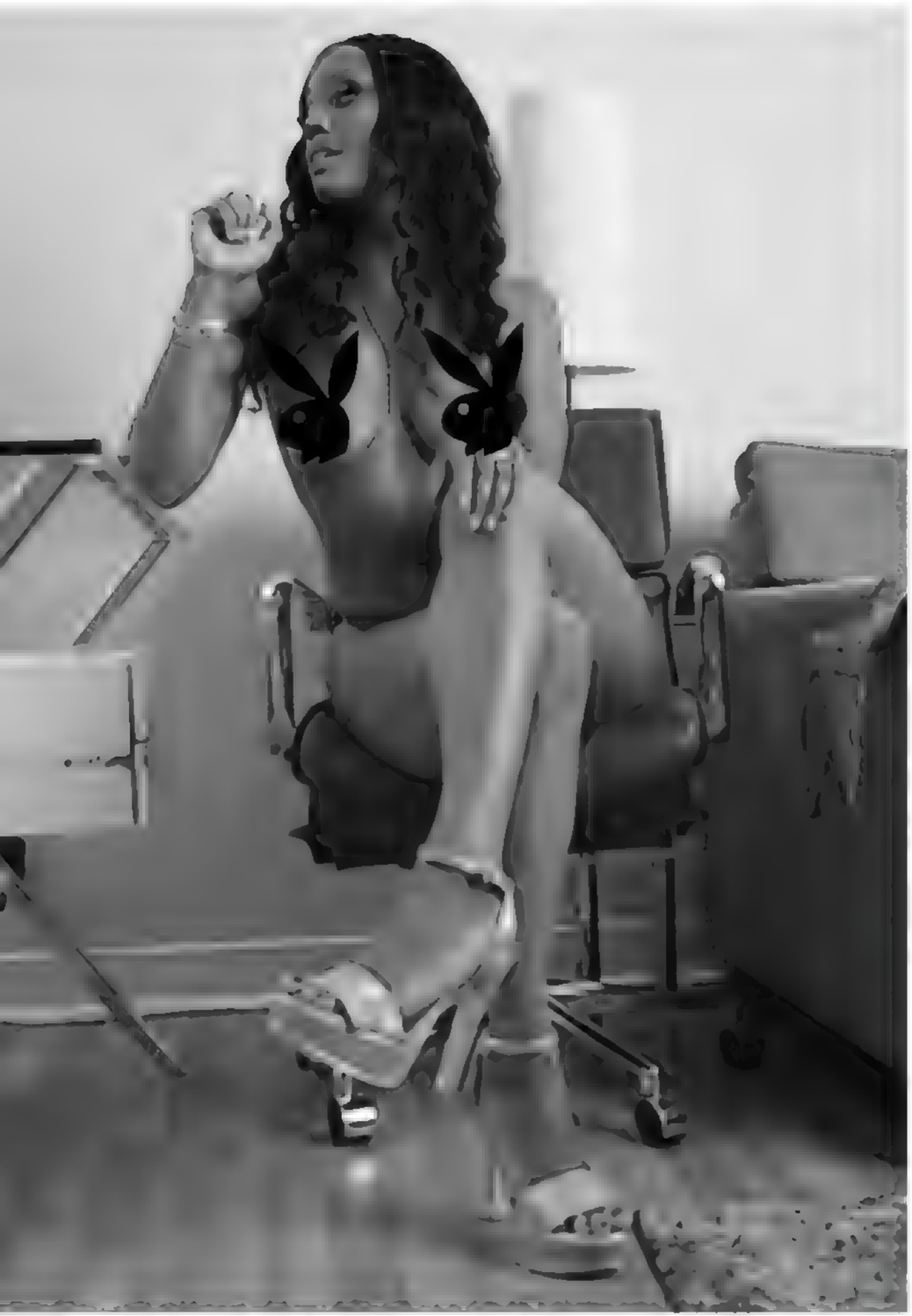
Do you have a secret talent?
I can cook ike a seasoned chef

A guilty pleasure?
I love sour patch k ds and watching fami y guy

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it
Twelve po nt gu de by "2B no question"
It's a for sure tear erker to getting over a break up.

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
I wou d say a sm e I know t's not a word but every time trave no where go, feel ike a friend y sm e s just a universa anguage

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
I wou d say sm e because fe s beautiful



STRIPPERS
= WORKERS
BY JESSICA P. OGILVIE
Even as they entertain you from the catwalk and champagne room, America's erotic dancers face a shameful array of workplace malfeasance; here, we go inside a growing and long overdue labor movement

Gizelle Marie was on her way home to New York City after working a shift at the Stadium Club, a Washington, D.C. establishment whose website promises "the most talented exotic entertainment in the industry." It was October 2017, and the 29-year-old dancer was flush with cash.

But as the black car she'd hired whisked her homeward, Marie's satisfaction turned to frustration. Scrolling through the social media feeds of other strippers, she saw, over and over, their complaints about club practices that prevent dancers from earning the kind of money she'd just made — specifically, the growing ranks of female bartenders who wear revealing clothing, dance provocatively and sometimes literally stand between strippers and their tips. With online followings that can hit six figures, these so-called "startenders" are a reliable draw for customers and an easy distraction from the women working onstage.

In a moment of exasperation, Marie typed up her feelings and posted them to Instagram: "I'm so sick of seeing my fellow dancers in New York complain about deserving what is supposed to be theirs. Me nor any dancer should have to leave the comfort of their own home city to make a fucking check."

For the next few days, Marie kept posting about the problem using the hashtag #NYCStripperStrike. By the end of the week, she was trending. Local and national media picked up the story, and Marie gained tens of thousands of followers. Over the next few months, she and other dancers joined larger protests, holding signs with slogans like *OUR BODIES, OUR MINDS, OUR POWER, TWERK IS WORK, AND STIGMA DRIVES VIOLANCE* at the Women's March on Central Park West and the International Women's Strike in Washington Square Park.

While startenders were her impetus, Marie had other, broader concerns as well. Across the U.S., strippers' rights are routinely and flagrantly infringed, with violations ranging from wage theft and employee misclassification to racial discrimination and sexual harassment. And according to many of the strippers we spoke with, few people inside or outside the clubs seem to care.

"There is this treatment of strippers by people who run the joints that we don't matter and that we are replaceable," says Jacqueline Frances, a New York–based dancer, comedian and activist. "There is a really profound disrespect for strippers by management — by everyone."

• • •

Stripping is legal; sex work in America, but states and counties have the right to regulate strip clubs — and many do, often quite spiritedly. Municipalities from San Diego to Tampa enforce a so-called six feet rule, for example, which stipulates that dancers must stay two yards away from patrons. Others impose regulations regarding how much nipple or areola women can reveal, how much underboob or underbutt or — in New York, for instance — what percentage of a club's square footage can be dedicated to adult entertainment. But even as they legislate dancers' movements and clothing down to fractions of an inch, lawmakers tend to ignore the fact that those same workers' rights are being roundly disregarded.

Among the industry's biggest problems is the corrupt and byzantine way money flows within its ranks. To begin with, strippers are typically classified as independent contractors rather than employees. This means they should be able to come and go as they please, charge whatever they choose to charge and dress as they see fit. Instead, many dancers describe being assigned shifts, told what to charge and held accountable for keeping certain hours. Such regulations should qualify them as employees of the club rather than independent contractors paying for the privilege of working there. But strippers are frequently denied the legal protection afforded W-2 employees, including payroll taxes, health care and workers' rights protections.

"Club owners want the benefits of you being an independent contractor, but they're treating you like an employee," says Logan Dee, co-leader of We Are Dancers USA, an organization that advocates for strippers' rights. "You are getting the crap end of both sticks."

Susan Crumiller, a New York–based attorney who works with #NYCStripperStrike, says that such misclassifications are a way for club owners to save money by cheating dancers and the Internal Revenue Service alike.

"It's ultimately tax avoidance, and it's also labor law avoidance," she says. "You're basically falsely claiming that you don't need to treat them in all the ways we have decided an employer must treat an employee."

Dee adds that the lump sums strippers are often required to hand over to clubs every night — "house fees," in stripper parlance — aren't subject to any oversight, meaning clubs can charge dancers as much as they want.

"I have to pay to work," she says. "It's like a hairdresser, where you rent out a space. In theory, it sounds great — like I'm paying for their space, and whatever I make, I take home. But the fees are not regulated, and they can be astronomical."

In the New York City clubs where Gizelle Marie has worked, including Starlets NYC and Club Angels NYC in Queens, and Club Lust in Brooklyn, house fees varied by hundreds of dollars, she says. (Management at all three establishments either did not respond to or declined requests for comment.)

"On slower nights it could be $60 to $100," Marie says. "If it was a big event, it could be $150 to $300."

In addition to house fees, strippers often hand over a percentage of revenue from lap dances and VIP rooms, as well as a percentage of their stage tips. They're expected to tip other staffers, including DJs, bartenders, house mothers, security workers and sometimes management, and some clubs charge extra fees for being late, missing shifts or other alleged infractions.

Case in point: Comfort Alabama Carter has worked with just such clubs. The 22-year-old has dewy porcelain skin and sleepy hazel eyes, a tattoo of a scorpion on her left hand and more than a dozen others embellishing the rest of her body. She loves dancing, she says. "The only thing that makes me not like working at these clubs is having my money taken from me."

At many clubs, Carter explains, management asks for money from dancers with virtually no rhyme or reason. Such payments are calculated at varying rates depending on a tangle of factors: what time women arrive at work, how many lap dances they sell, which manager happens to be working that day, whether it's a weeknight or a weekend. Some dancers are subjected to a 60-40 split when it comes to the money they make from lap dances — the house takes 40 percent, and the dancer takes 60 — but that rate can change on a whim.

According to Manuel*, who has worked on and off for 10 years as a strip-club manager and DJ in Los Angeles, the mandate to collect house fees and portions of lap dance fees comes from the top. ("Manuel" and other names marked with an asterisk have been changed.) That means managers, who are more likely to interact with dancers on a daily basis, don't necessarily have any say over how much they charge, at least up front.

"Clubs have a chain of command," he says. "Some clubs have everything from a vice president to a president to district and regional managers. It's always up to the owner or the people up the chain of command."

Adding to the confusion, says Valerie Stunning, a Las Vegas–based stripper and online activist, is the unspoken rule that dancers who tip bouncers and VIP room hosts at a higher percentage will be given access to higher-paying customers.

"A lot of the VIP hosts and managers — mostly it happens in the bigger, corporate clubs — orchestrate these rings of girls who are giving them extraordinary amounts of the money they earn in exchange for introductions to the high-paying clients, so the rest of us don't really ever have access to them," she says.

Stunning says she learned this the hard way at one of the first Vegas clubs in which she worked. One night, as she walked across the floor to approach a customer who was sitting by himself in a remote part of the club, two bouncers walked in front of her, stood side by side and prevented her from going any farther.

"They were all ex-UFC fighters; they were massive," she says. "They literally stepped toward the center of the entry point to physically block me from entering because I wasn't one of the girls they worked with."

The experience has led Stunning to make a grim comparison. "It's my opinion," she says, "that this kind of behavior is just another form of pimping."

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For women of color, things are even worse. Clubs that are considered upscale often hire lighter-skinned and white women almost exclusively, and at clubs in lower-income neighborhoods or predominantly black or Latino areas — referred to by several women we interviewed as "urban" clubs — darker-skinned women must abide by different rules than their lighter-skinned colleagues.

Chanel*, who has worked on #NYCStripperStrike with Marie, says she was a victim of blatant colorism in several locations.

"I wouldn't be allowed in VIP rooms when certain people would be in there, I would have to pay different house fees than other girls, or I would have to get dressed and get hair and makeup in a different area than other girls," she says. "I wasn't able to work on certain nights. I would be basically just overlooked and overshadowed, and I would rarely receive the recognition that was reserved for being a hard worker."

Siobhan Brooks is chair of the African-American studies department at California State University at Fullerton and author of *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*. She notes that discrimination against women of color and particularly darker-skinned women of color — is both rampant and familiar in the industry.

"That is a very common grievance, and it is also very old," she says. "Darker-skinned black women are restricted from those lucrative positions. They're usually put on shifts where you won't make a lot of money, and they have a harder time asking for money. They're haggled down more; there will be more resistance to giving her what she is worth."

Because of where so-called urban clubs are located, Brooks says, they become wrapped into the bigger picture of neighborhoods that are underserviced across the board.

"Urban clubs mirror any inner city's lack of resources," she says. "You have housing projects located in those areas. You may not have banks; you may have check-cashing places that surround those types of clubs, as well as underfunded schools, dilapidated buildings, over- or underpolicing." Results include "less investment in the dancer," which in turn can attract customers who "feel like they can get away with rape."

And when it comes to women of color getting hired at so-called upscale clubs, discrimination thrives as well. Those businesses may have unspoken quotas regarding how many women of color they hire, or they may bring on only lighter-skinned dancers. All of these factors can ultimately correlate with the way women are treated once they arrive at work.

"There's more of a stigma in the urban clubs that women are less educated and you can take advantage of them," says Brooks. "In the upscale clubs, you have your Julia Roberts stereotype — that they're educated and this is a stepping stone."

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Although women of color undoubtedly have it harder in this environment, dancers of all races are at heightened risk of sexual harassment and assault. Exact statistics on how frequently exotic dancers experience such violations are difficult to come by, as no governing body tracks complaints or accusations. But women report being groped by customers and managers alike, and even by police.

In those instances, says Dee, strippers have nowhere to turn. "If you get raped at work, what are you going to do — file with human resources?" she says. "Call the cops? You think the club is going to let those cops in? And even if they do, they're just going to tell you, 'What did you think? You're a stripper. Strippers can't be raped.'"

• • •

Onstage at Dames N' Games, a topless club in a desolate corner of downtown Los Angeles, blue and red spotlights shine onto the stage as a smewy woman in a pink schoolgirl skirt pretzels

ILLUSTRATION BY **QUENTIN MONGE**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SASHA MASLOV**

"IF YOU GET RAPED AT WORK, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO—FILE WITH HUMAN RESOURCES?"

herself around a brass pole. The strains of Marilyn Manson's "This Is Halloween" blare through the speakers, and by the time the song is over, she has peeled off her black bralette and is undulating her hips in front of four men who sit captivated at the tip rail, tossing money.

On the main floor, half a dozen other women circulate, sipping drinks and draping themselves over customers, whispering to one another or stretching their legs against the walls. Among them is a young woman with glossy chestnut hair, dressed in a one-piece bodysuit whose back consists of little more than a string. Sasha* sits down with me at a high bar table, a pint of beer in front of her, and explains that she's been working here for a year and likes it because it's "more transparent" than other places she's worked.

The payout system at Dames N' Games (part of the Spearmint Rhino empire, one of the largest chains of gentlemen's clubs in the country), she says, amounts to management taking $3 or $4 out of every $20 she makes on lap dances, depending on whether one or two managers are working that evening. That means $100 VIP room dances cost her $15 to $20, $300 VIP room dances cost $45 or $60, and so forth.

Sasha works there as an independent contractor, so she runs up against many of the same issues as Carter, Marie and Dee. For the most part, dancers' attempts to fight the system haven't gained much traction, even when they file lawsuits like the one brought against Spearmint Rhino in 2012. (Playboy reached out to Spearmint Rhino Consulting Worldwide, Inc., which owns Spearmint Rhino, for comment; a press relations representative referred us to the contact form on the club's website.) That's not surprising, says Stunning. Other, similar lawsuits, typically brought by dancers who believe their wages have been illegally garnished, have unfolded throughout the country. But little changes in their wake.

"In eight years of stripping, I've received at least five different notices that are like, 'So-and-so are filing a lawsuit,'" she says. "The club settles the suit and makes a few amendments in the paper work we sign when we get hired, and then things continue."

A raft of workplace dysfunctions contribute to the problem, some of which workers from more vanilla industries would recognize. Susan Minato, co-president of the labor union Unite Here Local 11, points out that complaining about customers goes against service providers' very job description.

"In hospitality, the idea is the [service provider] is there to make the guest feel good, to entertain you and to serve you," she says. "If something goes wrong, complaining about a guest puts them in a very awkward situation."

But Crumiller believes a big reason such legal efforts haven't resulted in real change is that the culture at large, while it may treat others in the service industry with at least rote courtesy, is decidedly not on the side of strippers.

"Dancers are a very marginalized group," says Crumiller. "They are very vulnerable, and part of it is because, as a society, we don't really care about these women."

Stunning adds that women in this line of work often don't acknowledge the validity of their jobs even to themselves, internalizing the message that their work has no value.

"A lot of the women who do this job, even if they're not ashamed of it, are holding out, waiting to go work a 'real job,' or whatever," she says. "They don't believe anyone is on their side if their rights are being violated."

This is where Gizelle Marie and her allies come in.

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When Marie began organizing #NYCStripperStrike, her work became part of a growing number of endeavors — on social media, in private community meetings and even in courtrooms across the country — spearheaded by strippers who are done being treated as though they have no standing under the law. Today, there are glimmers of hope that their efforts will pay off.

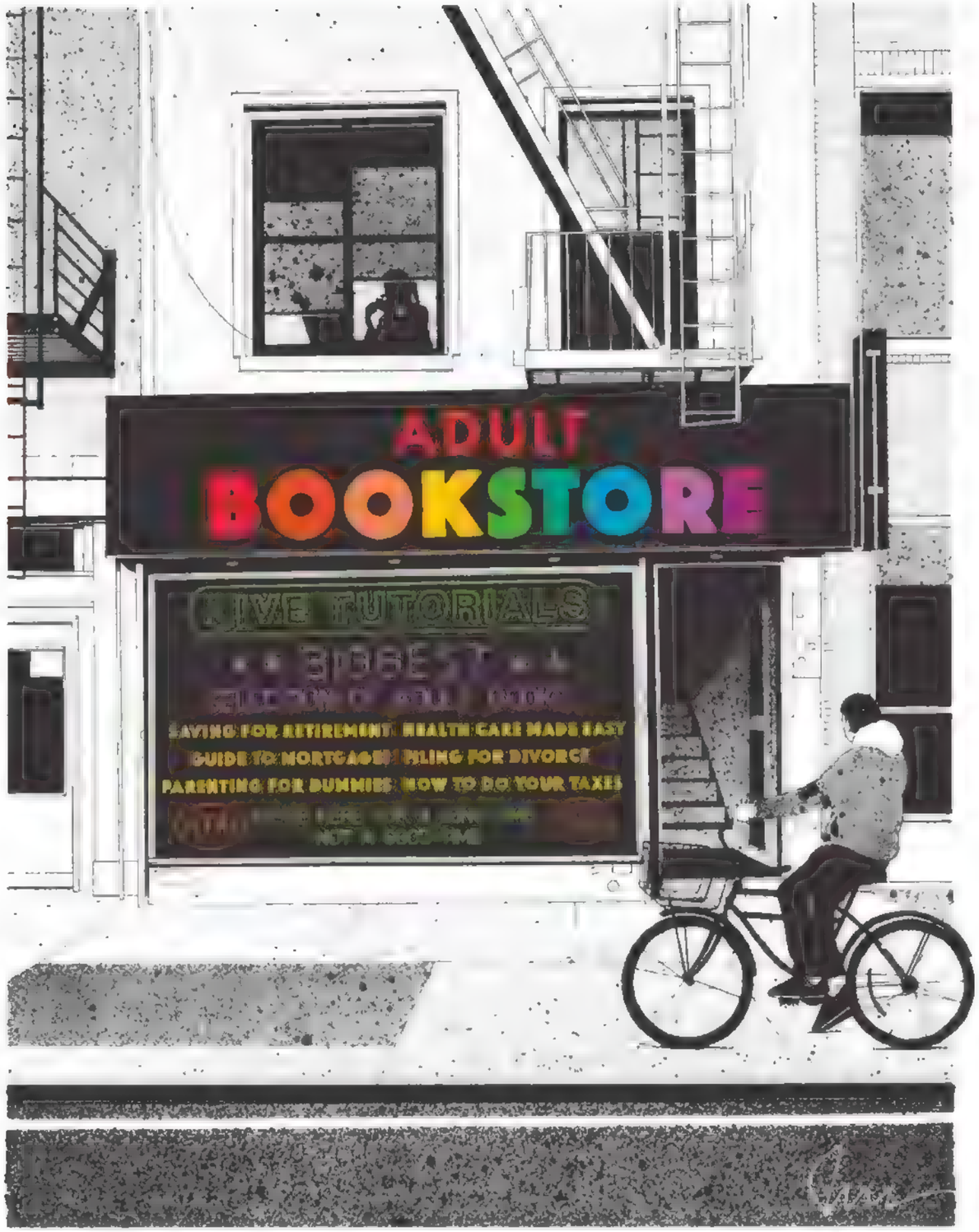
As of August 2018, Marie and another woman working as a stripper in New York City have filed three different complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The complaints address issues of sexual harassment and discrimination and could lead to lawsuits. In California, a State Supreme Court decision in April 2018 made it more difficult for businesses to classify workers as independent contractors, which some strippers believe could affect their classification in clubs. Many strippers were galvanized by the April 2018 passage of the U.S. House and Senate bills known as FOSTA-SESTA (the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act), which cracked down on what sex workers can and cannot say online — a move many such workers felt ultimately placed them in harm's way. And then there was Instagram's sudden decision in May 2018 to censor any posts with the hashtag #stripper or #strippers.

To Antonia Crane, a Los Angeles–based writer and stripper, this is a rallying point. Part of the first and only stripper union created in San Francisco in the late 1990s, Crane says the efforts she sees among the stripper community now — along with the recent political events — have created a growing movement unlike anything she's seen before.

"It's a really crucial time," she says. "We need to do a lot, and it's important that we do it right now."

A year and a half after her initial Instagram post, Marie is traveling the country to meet other women (and spend time away from an environment in New York City that she felt had become toxic). She has been spreading the word, building bridges and joining forces with other strippers. If she succeeds — if the women providing the entertainment at strip clubs demand justice as a united front — there will be little owners can do to stop them.

After all, says Marie, "without us, there would be no club." ■



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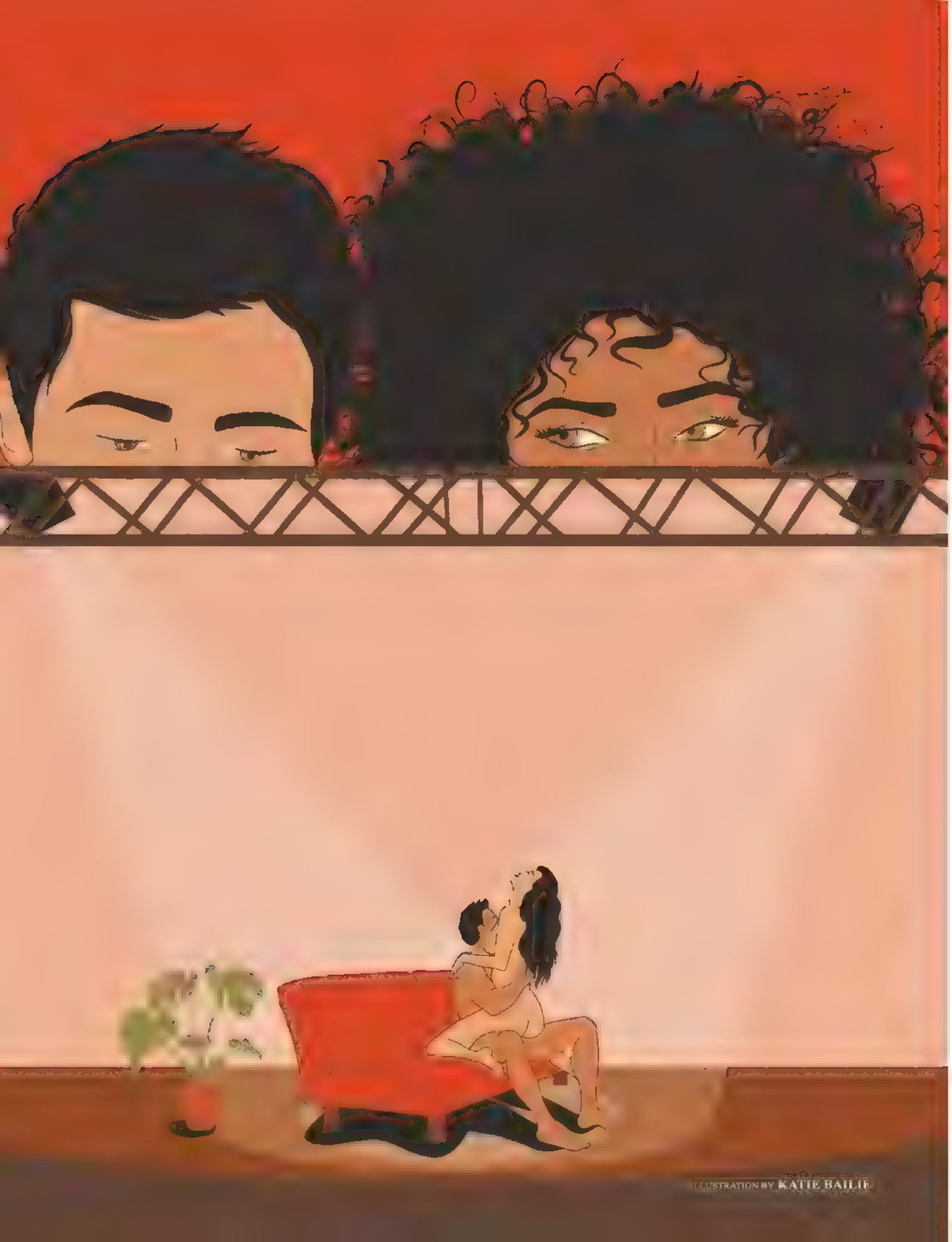

PLAYBOY Advisor

Sex writer **Maria Del Russo** advises a woman who has a knee-jerk reaction to her boyfriend's need to jerk. Plus, advice on dressing up, turning off and going deeper during sex

Q: *How many women watch porn and masturbate with their boyfriends? Online sex therapists seem to routinely advocate this practice, but I haven't met a single woman who actually engages in it. Here's my story. My boyfriend and I have a healthy sex life, but he admits that he masturbates to relieve stress. He loves porn, and he says he never looks at photos of me when he's flying solo because he doesn't want our intimacy to be "superficial." I'm already insecure about my body, and I know I'll never live up to the women he's watching. I'm not a big fan of porn, nor do I need to masturbate when I'm in a relationship. Should I let him continue to do his thing, vocalize my insecurity or suggest mutual masturbation (and possibly humiliate myself in the process)? E.V.,*

A: Let's begin by acknowledging the utility of porn. Pornography is consumed largely as a stimulant for getting off — not, as you seem to fear, as a substitute for sex or as a standard of attractiveness. Couples may choose to watch porn together to set the mood. Some masturbate while watching it, others don't. Some watch together because they find it titillating, others because it's intriguing, and the rest do it because it's funny.

In short, regardless of your relationship status, there are many reasons to watch porn. One thing is certain, though: Women absolutely partake alongside their boyfriends. Based on my research, few comprehensive surveys on this subject have been published, but with nearly 100 million people visiting Pornhub every day, it would not be unreasonable to assume that some of those visitors are couples in healthy relationships.

You should be grateful that your boyfriend is so forthcoming about his pornviewing habits; he's essentially handing you his unlocked iPhone. His relationship with porn and masturbation, as you describe it, seems to be a non-threatening one, given how he views them as separate from intercourse even though they're just as integral to his emotional well-being. By the way, science is on his side: The mental-health benefits of masturbation include reduced stress, better-quality sleep and improved concentration.

You, on the other hand, seem to have a more, let's say *nuanced*, relationship with masturbation, porn, sex and self-esteem. It's important to be open with your partner about your insecurities — physical, emotional and sexual — because he who loves you may be able to help you overcome them. Forcing him into your comfort zone by giving him an ultimatum isn't the answer. Nor should you suggest mutual masturbation if you're not legitimately curious about it. (He may not even be interested, because, as you suggest, he likes to compartmentalize.) Sexuality is complicated, and even when we have romantic partners, it can be beneficial to experience some of our sexual desires and fantasies alone.

To reinforce why you needn't worry about his habits, allow me to deploy the only kind of metaphor that can compete with sex: food. Sometimes you want nothing more than to slowly savor a succulent 10-ounce Wagyu filet mignon and a glass of cabernet. Other times all you crave is a cold slice of day-old Domino's pizza. In both cases, you're experiencing hunger; your means of satiation are merely circumstantial. Have confidence in knowing that pepperoni could never replace steak — and men love steak.

Q: *Technology has created so many ways you can be caught juggling your options: random numbers texting you, a flame calling while you're on another date, women messaging you in the middle of the night, Bumble notifications popping up unexpectedly, people adding you to their Instagram stories without permission. What's the key to being on the grid while dating multiple people? J.S.,*

A: Believe it or not, dating in 2019 is not that difficult. Turn on your phone's "do not disturb" function before your date begins. In reality, the only people who fear being caught dating other people are those who are being deceitful, so your question seems to indicate you want to date in secret. That, my friend, is a zero-sum game in the digital age. Be up-front about your goals with everybody you're dating. Anything else is a waste of your time and theirs. If you just want to have fun, let them know. If you're not ready to be exclusive, let them know. If you have no interest in something long term, make that clear before having sex.

At this point, most well-adjusted single people expect any social encounter to be interrupted by some form of technology. If you silence all your devices, your date will likely consider it chivalrous and refreshing. By the way, if you're on a first, second or even third date and she demands to know why other women are contacting you, run

Q: *What's the longest you can go without having sex with your girlfriend before you should worry about the health of your relationship? –R.W*

A: What you're actually asking is: Is sex a barometer for the strength of a relationship? The answer is no. There's no universal timeline that tracks when a sexless relationship enters the "Holy shit, we're in danger" zone.

Here's the rub: Isn't the guarantee of sex what makes committed relationships so fantastic? Of course it is! Even so, I wouldn't dare suggest that a sexless relationship is an unhealthy one. Libidos ebb and flow. Stress, pregnancy, motherhood, medication and menstrual cycles all have an effect on a woman's sex drive. You should be sensitive to any of these factors, should they apply.

Because you're asking, I assume you're already concerned. Is your girlfriend aware that you're concerned? Does she know your definition of a "healthy" sex life? My advice is to seduce your girlfriend to the best of your ability based on what you know turns her on. Should she demur, it's time to have a dialogue about each others' expectations in the bedroom lest you start looking elsewhere to fulfill your very human needs.

Q: *If I had to make one luxury purchase to impress women, what should it be: a newer car, an expensive TV, a sophisticated wardrobe? I'm middle-income but want to own something that will wow every girl who meets me—something that proves I have class. –B.C.,*

A: You're reading PLAYBOY, so I assume you already understand that class is defined by attitude, not material goods. How you treat other women, the way you interact with waitstaff and how you talk about your exes and family will woo any well-adjusted woman more than Maseratis or Maison Margiela.

If you want to start *presenting* yourself to the world as a sophisticated man, however, start with a smart wardrobe, which needn't be astronomically expensive but should be an investment — in both time and money. As Will Noguchi, senior visual stylist of men's subscription service Bombfell, advises, "You need to shop smart. This means spending your money on key pieces rather than a wide range of fast-fashion items." He suggests starting with a fitted navy blazer, a classic leather jacket and a pair of dark wash jeans. Jeans and leather jackets never go out of style; spend some extra money here as these pieces can be worn year-round.

"Aside from versatility," adds Noguchi, "the most important thing to consider when updating your wardrobe is fit. Look for pieces with tailored or tapered fits to alleviate looking boxy. A 'trim' aesthetic will naturally give you a more expensive, elevated look."

Q: *I have been in a relationship for three years, and I recently played a joke on my boyfriend that I now regret. At Christmas, in front of my whole family, I got down on one knee while holding a small box and pretended I was proposing to him. (In reality, the box contained a small gift for my mom.) My boyfriend, caught off-guard, looked panicked — a reaction I didn't expect. We eventually laughed the whole thing off, but I haven't been able to get the desperate look on his face out of my head. I can't help thinking that he'll never want to marry me someday, in which case what's the point of prolonging our relationship? —S.M.*

A: You had it coming. Do you recognize that? Say it with me now: "I recognize I made a mistake. I do." Good.

Marriage proposals are nothing to joke about, so consider your turmoil a referendum not only on your sense of humor but on your knowledge of your boyfriend's headspace. I must assume he appeared panicked because you two haven't talked about your future together.

Sit him down and have a conversation about where he sees this going. The two of you have been together for three years; at this juncture, talks of marriage and a proposal should be met with elation — that is, if a life of monogamy is what you both aspire to. Pick a time and place that will allow him to give you his full attention. Don't do it before bed or shout at him from the kitchen while he's watching TV. Get to the point: "Where do you see us in two years? Can you imagine us getting married?" Until you talk to him about his plans for your future, you'll continue to worry yourself with speculation.

Q: *I'm having a hard time sustaining a relationship because I love the chase. I don't go out to bars with men I'm dating because my eyes wander. I recently stopped drinking because I recognized that, for me, getting drunk was synonymous with picking up men and having drunk sex with strangers. This is a pattern. (By the way, it was easy for me to stop drinking, so I don't think I'm an alcoholic.) Do I need to give myself more time to sow my oats, or might I have an intimacy or commitment problem? –R.G.*

One of my more infamous dating stories involves spotting a hotter guy across the bar while I was on a date, faking a headache to end said date and then going back to the bar to pick up the hottie.

A: Oh, younger self, is that you? One of my more infamous dating stories involves spotting a hotter guy across the bar while I was on a date, faking a headache to end said date and then going back to the bar to pick up the hottie. The question is, Do you consider me talented or unstable?

For me, the chase was a means of avoiding one very real issue. Yes, I was afraid of intimacy, but I was terrified of rejection. When you're constantly looking for the next best thing, there's no way the person sitting across from you can hurt you. This is probably, at least to some extent, why you keep swiping left on men in real life. The thrill of catch and release insulates you from some harsher reality that no sex columnist should attempt to diagnose.

You may not have a drinking problem, but you most certainly have an intimacy problem. I was able to deal with my vulnerability issues through therapy; you might benefit from the same. An even harsher reality check is that for many people who exhibit these patterns, sooner or later their options run out. Don't rob yourself of the gift of getting to know a sexual partner on a deeper level. Fleeting sex, one night stands, free drinks and first kiss thrills can sustain you only for so long. I would hate to see what happens should you ever find yourself alone at last call.

Q: *I suffer from vulvar vestibulodynia and struggle with intense pain during penetrative sex. I've been going to physical therapy for a couple of years. I also take duloxetine, which helps control nerve pain, and my condition is slowly improving. I have a long-term partner who is empathetic and concerned about hurting me, so we've been relying almost entirely on clitoral stimulation. I'm ready to try penetration again but have residual anxiety from a lifetime of pelvic-floor dysfunction. How can I ease back into vaginal sex and shift my focus from pain to pleasure? –E.S.*

A: Vulvar vestibulodynia, a form of vulvodynia, is more common than you might think. It has been reported that up to 16 percent of women in the U.S. will experience vulvodynia in their lifetimes. And yet, most women who suffer from this condition do so in silence. It's understandable that you have anxiety around potential pain, and you're lucky to have a supportive partner. He's going to be an important part of reducing your anxiety around sex.

Aside from being forthcoming about any anxiety you or your partner may have, come up with a safe word. Make it something non-pain related and easy to say and remember. Agree that either of you is allowed to use it if sex gets too painful or if your anxiety starts to spin out of control.

Sex is a form of pleasure, and pleasure takes work and communication, whether you suffer from vulvodynia or not. Every healthy sexual experience begins with a clear mind that's ready to focus on having fun, giving back and letting go. You're lucky to have an amazing partner who seems to want to prioritize your pleasure. Be open to the journey. ■

PRESSLY
Photography by EYE CANDY IMAGERY - VINNIE

Tell us a little about yourself.
I'm an easy going g rl who's grown up and forever lved in a sma l beach town. I'm into a of your typica g rly th ngs like shopping and makeup, but also enjoy a good war movie and adventur- ing. keep a sma circle of friends but love them fierce y. 'm a ittle bit logica and a tt e bit wild

What do you enjoy most about what you do?
I've a ways enjoyed getting made up and getting in front of the camera. It's something 've done since was a litt e girl Everyone deserves to fee beautiful

What is your greatest life achievement thus far?
My daughter

What would you say is your best feature?
My eyes

What makes you feel sexy?
F n shing a great workout.

What advice would you give to women aspiring to get into modeling?
Stay safe out there ladies! Do your research.

Favourite Shoot Location?
I'm a natural at the beach. It's my fa vorite p ace to be

Do you prefer kissing or cuddling?
I've been told that 'm very good at both. So 'm going to say both

What are you really good at?
I'd say kissing, but that's already noted above. I'm an excellent stener and very good at reading peop e.

What is one thing people may be surprised to find out about you?
I've gone to co ege, have a career, have a daughter, and ve a fair y norma life.

Do you have a catchphrase?
I'm n b g be ever n "L ve your best life" (responsibly of course)

RAPPER'S DELIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAYSCORRUPTEDMIND

Hip-hop megastar **Travis Scott** discusses the freedom and constraints that come with breaking ground in music's most powerful genre

"Let me get that blunt." Travis Scott pokes his head out from the backseat of his silver Bentley. His security guard lights up, tests his work and then passes it to his boss. The 26-year-old Houstonborn rapper's bleached braids are all we see of him as he inhales and exhales, rolling up the windows. He insists on sitting in the luxury car the same one he turned up in with his driver at the wheel—because the Hollywood Hills midcentury modern edifice that is the site of today's PLAYBOY shoot imposes a strict no-smoking policy. His entourage of 10, decked out in their leader's merchandise, never leaves the driveway, setting up a scene and an energy only a rap superstar could create.

Scott is today's most hyped hip-hop artist, following a slow and steady climb that began with an appearance on Kanye West's 2012 compilation Cruel Summer. His career trajectory dramatically shifted last year when Astroworld, his third studio album, debuted at number one on the U.S. Billboard Top 200 thanks in part to a laundry list of genre-defying features from heavyweights including Drake, Kid Cudi and James Blake. This winter, he translated his warped atmospheric soundscape into a two-leg experiential stadium tour of the same name, equipped with a Ferris wheel and splashes of color as trippy as his sparse staccato rhymes. And he has already performed at the Super Bowl.

Such a freewheeling artist, backed by a major label and with six Grammy nominations, would not exist without the rappers who came before him. Scott agrees: Sitting next to him in the hazy car is the rapper Nas, whom Scott personally selected to discuss the evolution of hip-hop. "How you came into the game, it was kind of crazy," he says to Nas.

Nasir Jones, the New York–born poet, began his music career in the early 1990s, about a decade after the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" hit the Billboard Top 40. In 1994, Nas moved the needle with his revolutionary debut album, Illmatic, whose deft wordplay and expertly woven beats tell a vivid tale of a young man from the inner city. At the same time, rap, on its way to becoming the top-selling music genre, was still widely dismissed as a fad, too volatile and monotonous to last.

Yet here they are, more than two decades later, sitting in this rare Bentley, two icons, from two different eras in the ever-evolving American hip-hop timeline, discussing the past, present and future of a genre that has both lifted them up and forced them to tear down the industry walls that confine them. Their hour-long conversation, presented here in edited and condensed form, begins with a discussion of the most glaring

INTRO BY **ARIELA KOZIN**

STYLING BY DOMINIQUE BISSON. VINTAGE JACKET, TURTLENECK and BLUE VELVET PANTS BY SAINT LAURENT.

unique flow over beats. It was like straight soul, and man, you're telling your story; it was just bar to bar, killing it, and not really about anything being catchy. It was just really raw.

Nowadays, people might not see it that way, but it's the same thing. It's just as raw. But technology, man. We came up on iPhones, you know what I mean? We're at a point now where we don't even write our raps down. We're just going straight off the dome in the booth. I know from people I work with, like Young Thug and Quavo, most everyone likes going in and just laying down whatever's on their minds.

The past generation knocked down so many doors where, you know, they were spitting a lot of pain, man. They was dealing with a lot of police stuff. We're still dealing with that now, but it wasn't so free. Now we got more of a voice at the label. We can kind of put out our own music whenever. You and I could do a song during this interview and upload it right now if we wanted to.

NAS: That's right. Being an MC or a rapper, you got to change with the times. I can stay me, sure, but the challenge is to stay with what's going on. If you look at the great ones from back then, a lot of them have four albums; they had short careers. That's changed now. All the restrictions are gone. You can be free to make your music.

When hip-hop started out, you only had a top five. You had a short list of dope rappers, from Ice Cube to Slick Rick. You could count them on your fingers. Hip-hop is such a big thing now that everybody's jumping in on it. There are so many different styles that by the time you do the thing that you do, this dude over here done started a whole new way. You got to stay on top of what's going on just for the love of music.

You said it was once about writing down the pain and all of that. Nowadays the pain has changed. We're after different things. We broke past the barriers. We understand what we need to do and we're in control of what we're doing, and no one can stop it now. No one can tell us what to do, what we can't do. Rap music can't be stopped now.

SCOTT: I got a whole other line of respect for how you came into the game. Me, personally, when I was coming into it, I was never into rap-rap. I had to learn to like it, because I didn't understand it.

I'm from Houston, so listening to East Coast rap and West Coast rap is a little different from the South. It's a different type of tempo, a different type of tone. So when I heard it, it just sounded foreign. But the swag, you know what I mean? The way you carried yourself. Just growing up listening and dialing into your albums, you hear the art of telling a story. I feel like I was a kid who was just by myself, alone in my mind all the time. I always had this, like, deep, just floating consciousness.

One of my idols is Kid Cudi and the way he tells his stories about how he felt as a kid growing up, like where he's from. I related to that. I adopted my own form of storytelling — whether it's through melodies or through raps or both. And as a producer too, just studying other fire producers — Pete Rock, Kanye, Pharrell — I was always into mixing different genres. I wasn't stuck solely in one field.

I like to bridge the gap between different styles of music. I always made my own beats and shit. I love James Blake, Toro y Moi and Björk. These types of people influenced me on another level. That's what's moved me. I mean, that's the type of picture I want to paint.

When I was old enough to understand what you were spitting, it was just like, Oh, shit. Now that I know music, I can see how you came into the game. Like, man, I was online watching when you came out at a show, and you spit that verse. I forget ——

differences between their debuts, the advancement of technology, the influence of social media and the power of the internet.

SCOTT: Speaking of a time before all this technology, it was like, "Okay, I rap." You had to get to this popular producer in your city. He would hear your shit, and maybe he'd let you record and give you a beat. Then he'd bring you to the DJ, and radio was the main problem. But now it's like, man, I got my own social media. I can drop my shit. I can cater to my own followers. People can look at my shit if they want to. It's not like the radio, where somebody can stop people from hearing me. I can yell it loud right now: I want to rap! If people want to catch on to it, they can catch on to it. And then, if you want to explain what's going on in your personal life, you talk to your fans too. Back then you had to do a press conference.

NAS: You can reach the world faster — a lot faster than back then. That's a great thing, because it was mind-boggling trying to figure out how to get this message out to people and market your record at the right time and then drop a single six weeks before the album. That's gone.

SCOTT: You can reach the world now.

NAS: Now you can just go, "Yo, the album will be out in a week." No single, no nothing.

SCOTT: Whatever you want.

NAS: Because of the internet. We can go do a song right now and put it up. We don't have to ask nobody. The record industry actually follows what we do, especially once you make your name in the game.

SCOTT: I'm guessing hip-hop used to be about bars and just a

FAUX FUR COAT BY BALENCIAGA. VINTAGE WHITE BUTTON DOWN. VINTAGE PINK FLOYD T SHIRT FROM FOR ALL TO ENVY. JEWELRY SCOTT'S OWN.

VINTAGE WHITE PANTS . JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN

"I'm an expressive artist, but with media and shit, it gets misconstrued."

NAS: "Live at the Barbeque"?

SCOTT: "Live at the Barbeque," yeah. When I saw that video, man, I felt like I was in the crowd. You know what I'm saying? I was like, "Yo, this nigga right here is fuckin' crazy." It kind of relates back to me when I was doing *Astroworld*. I want people to experience what it was like to listen to the *album*. Now, you sometimes lose the experience. Everything's digital, so you don't get the honor of going to the record store to get a record or a CD. You download it or stream it, and then that's it.

You pulled up. You had an idea. You was figuring it out, man. Like it just took over my whole mind-set, though. I've been working toward, as an artist, just bringing back the experience. For my first album, *Rodeo*, I made an action figure.

NAS: When I first saw you coming up with the action figure, I was like, "Damn, I wish I could have thought of that." And then I just heard your music, and I said, "This dude is coming." You was doing something I wish I did when I was in my 20s, which was not giving the camera much. If you go back to one of the interviews I did on *Video Music Box*, I don't look at the camera that much. Through the years, I would do award shows or whatever, and then I would skip the red carpet. The record label would be mad at me, that I'm up here and I'm selling all these units and I won't even walk the carpet. When you cover your face so you don't look down, I think, Damn, I wish....

I live vicariously through you when you do that, bro, because I feel you on that. You here to do the music and leave your stain on this world. Whether you be in front of them cameras or not, you don't even care.

SCOTT: I don't care. That's my whole shit, bro. It's about the music. I just express what a kid my age is going through in a time. Being from Houston, a lot of my music is just talking about what I experienced growing up in my neighborhood, in my town. You just try to make moves and inspire people to go out and help others, to be a better person. Like, "Yo, let's be on this. Let's try to get on this type of wave."

I wouldn't say I don't feel compelled to speak on political issues, sometimes you just don't want to speak too much on stuff you don't know much about. It's not like I'm not thinking about what's going on in the world. I'm an expressive artist, but with media and shit, it gets misconstrued. As I'm sitting with you right now, I'm still figuring this out, you know?

NAS: Politics definitely affects the way I think, but the way I write is my day to day life. I did a song talking about daughters, because I have a daughter. "Daughters" was nominated for a Grammy. I feel it — that's why I wrote it — but I had no idea it would be acknowledged like that when it came out. So I write about day-to-day stuff, and I don't plan to write anything political, because then it's forced. It ain't a natural expression.

SCOTT: Yeah.

NAS: One thing we can't allow politics to do is take over our mind and make us fall into their game. What's going on in the news could consume our lives. If that happens, life doesn't go on. We need to continue going on.

Ray Charles and Billie Holiday and all of those great acts were entertaining and going through worse times than now. They were inspiring us. When Michael Jackson did *Thriller*, that was during Reaganomics. He gave us something to look at other than the politics, the propaganda, the lies. He gave us inspiration. And Whitney Houston, she came out and did songs that rocked us and inspired kids to want to sing and be great. The politicians want our full attention. They're hustling. I'm not getting caught up in that. I make music about life, and life comes before politics.

SCOTT: You can never predict who's going to be the voice.

NAS: As long as you got hoods, there's going to be ——

SCOTT: A voice.

NAS: Those hoods are always going to yell out and say what's going on. It's going to get more fly and futuristic. But the message is always, We want food, shelter, health care and all the things we're deprived of. We want no police brutality. We want all these things. That's what hip-hop is talking about. I'm using this to get by. I'm drinking this to get by. I'm smoking this to get by. I'm selling this to get by. All those things are the ingredients for this rap thing, and that's never going to stop.

We're sitting here in a fly-ass car and this is all we dreamed about — all our brothers coming up and having something out of this life, not just material things but having whatever you want, seeing the fruits of your labor. A lot of artists never get the chance to see that.

SCOTT: We can do so much with our voices. We can go so crazy. Back then, man, I swear you can listen to a lot of albums and it was all making beats on one programmer, you know what I mean? It was only a couple of machines at the time. It's so crazy now. The technology is a new wave. It's so dynamic.

I collaborate with different artists like John Mayer and James Blake just for vocal compatibility, because we can stretch our vocals into the next level, and with the way we record now we can do so much. The programmer only lets us do so much. We got to put it on a disc, you know what I mean?

NAS: The hip-hop game is about staying and sustaining and keeping it going. You're a great rapper, but they can't just put you in a rapper box, because your music is going in so many different directions. You're a rock star, and it always was like that. It comes from the hood. It comes from the mud and then it blows up, and then who's going to hang around? Who's going to be the one that sticks around and keeps giving us that excitement? That's what makes you great, when you can maintain in this game.

SCOTT: When I started, I never thought I could do arenas and be so big that so many people would come listen to the music and know the words. I think what makes a great artist is just the people you touch. Are they moving to your music? Are they living their life to it? Are they rocking with it or feeling inspired by it, or is it helping them get through something?

NAS: This shit is a blood sport. This shit ain't easy. This is one of the hardest games ever. I love it right now because it's testing you. What are you made of? Can you survive? What do you have to offer in 2019? Because the moment you sleep, the moment you blink your eyes too long, your spot is taken. And that's the excitement of it.

SCOTT: There's no barrier. There's just so much of a flow of things that we're trying to—we're gettin' it out, and we're expressing it in a different way. What's happening during our time in life, what's happening in the streets. We just expressing it in a different way. ■

LEFT: VINTAGE WHITE SUIT. JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN. RIGHT: VINTAGE PINK FLOYD T-SHIRT FROM FOR A... TO ENVY. VINTAGE WHITE PANTS. JEWELRY AND REEBOK SHOES SCOTT'S OWN

NATALY CORREA

Photography by VICTOR KENZO Instagram @VICTORKENZO MUA BEL BLAZQUEZ
WWW.VICTORKENZO.ES

CalvinKlein

Nataly Correa is a Colombian model born in Cartagena.

At age 12 she began her career as a youth model in one of the best agencies in Medellin, Colombia. With great success as a model and representing some of the most important firms in the country, at age 15, thanks to her recognition, she was chosen for the cover of SOHO magazine, one of the most prestigious magazines in Colombia. The cover caused a big controversy, since never before a minor model had been photographed for that magazine. This controversy got to the point that the president of the country at that time had to take part.

Later, Nataly was hired by some of the best na- magazines like DON [illegible] SOHO, [illegible] FORMA. The beautiful model had interna- [illegible] and major events such as FTV, fashion Colombia

[illegible] known Real Madrid player Ka- [illegible]

LOUNGE
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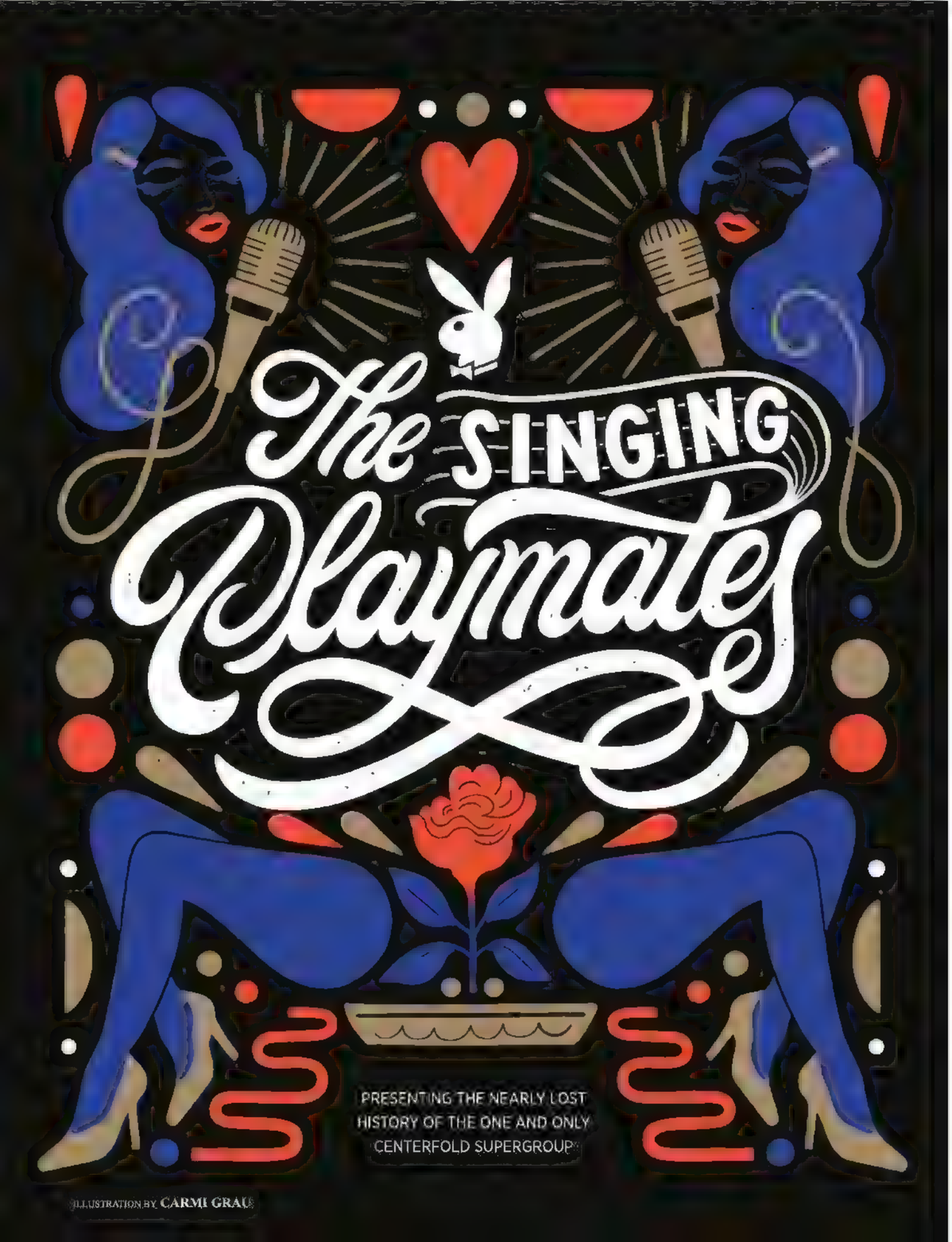


BY
STEVE PALOPOLI

IN THIS AGE OF ALEXA AND SIRI, WHEN accessing information is usually as easy as shouting at your electronic device, it can be surprising to encounter a question with an elusive answer. This is doubly true of any topic related to Playboy's past, much of which has been thoroughly documented by fans, collectors and historians.

But ask Google about Playboy's one and only girl group, and you'll find just such a search-engine stumper. Although many of the specifics surrounding the group have been lost to time, the story of the Singing Playmates — one of lofty ambition, international scope and a bond that has lasted decades — is well worth telling.

• • •

The Singing Playmates were formed in the late 1970s on the initiative of July 1977 Playmate Sondra Theodore. "It was her idea," says July 1981 Playmate Heidi Sorenson. "She was the lead in our group. And her voice was just out of this world."

The lineup changed over the years, but the core consisted of Theodore, Sorenson, Michele Drake (May 1979), Kelly Tough (October 1981) and Nicki Thomas (March 1977). Another figure central to the group was their producer, Vic Caesar, who looked and sounded like the radio disc jockey Wolfman Jack and was most famous for writing a Richard Nixon campaign song. (He also arranged the surprisingly famous theme to the Playboy pinball game.)

"He was like our den mother," says Tough. "We loved Vic because he pushed us, and he protected us too. I give him a lot of points for putting up with us, because we were a handful."

For several of the Playmates, getting into the group wasn't easy. Drake had come out of the Los Angeles rock scene, where she was running around with members of the Knack and Joan Jett's former band the Runaways. The first time she auditioned for the Singing Playmates, she didn't make it. For her second tryout, she says, she brought along a little extra star power. Actor Dan Aykroyd escorted Drake in a limo to the Playboy Club. Still, she didn't make the cut. Determined to change her fate, Drake presented Theodore and Hefner with a tape of herself performing a song she'd written about an ex-boyfriend. "You wrote that?" she remembers Hef exclaiming. "You're in!"

Sorenson's first audition didn't go well either, and she initially wasn't chosen for the group — "probably because I was too self-conscious," she speculated in the story that accompanied her Playmate pictorial. At the time, she resided at the Playboy Mansion ("I think I have one of the records for living there the longest, actually," she says today), a situation she decided to turn to her advantage. The Singing Playmates rehearsed inside the Mansion's guesthouse, so Sorenson was able to hear every song they were working on. After they left for the day, she would go in and practice with their equipment.

"I was so determined to get into this group, you have no idea," says Sorenson. "I memorized everything. I learned all the harmonies. One day I talked Vic into letting me sing along during the rehearsal, and the rest is history." Determination was key: Rehearsals were five days a week, eight hours a day. "It was full-on. Everybody went into this 100 percent," she says.

Things got even more serious when famed dancer and choreographer Miriam Nelson was hired to polish up the act. Nelson, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 98, had collaborated with the biggest stars of the golden age of Hollywood, from Judy Garland to Doris Day. The practice space moved off Mansion grounds to a location on Sepulveda Boulevard.

"Hugh Hefner had converted a store into a rehearsal hall with a new dance floor, mirrors on the wall, a ballet barre and couches, chairs and a well-stocked refrigerator," Nelson wrote in her memoir *My Life Dancing With the Stars*. "It goes without saying these young women were beautiful and had gorgeous bodies, but their singing was fair and their dancing was fairer. I had my doubts about their abilities, but Mr. Hefner was paying terrific money."

"We got pretty strict," says Drake. "Miriam's job was to whip us into shape to become a Vegas act. We were very lucky to have her. She started us off in one-and-a-half-inch heels and got us up to two-and-a-half- to three-inch heels. She was a true pro. She knew what she was doing."

"They had such energy that for the first time, I could see this act was going to work just fine."

One day Hef swung by the practice space, unannounced, to see how the group was coming along. "The girls really put on a show for him," Nelson wrote. "They had such energy that for the first time, I could see this act was going to work just fine."

• • •

The Singing Playmates got a taste of performing live with appearances at small clubs around L.A., billed under a different name so they could get some more or less anonymous practice time under their belt. "It was really funny," says Tough. "We would show up to a small venue in a big black limousine. When we were onstage, people were standing right at our feet. All these guys would be looking up at us while we were singing, like, 'Who are these broads?' "

By this time they had honed a highly choreographed song-and-dance routine that included a tune the popular soul singer Barry White had written, called "I'm So Glad That I'm a Woman." The set consisted mostly of medleys to which they could match their costumes: standards performed in top hats and tails; country songs in tight pants, vests and cowboy boots. Sometimes the

The Singing Playmates made multiple appearances at small venues in the Los Angeles area, including Danny's Apple nightclub in 1981 above Pictured: Heidi Sorenson, Lorraine Michaels, Kelly Tough, Sondra Theodore and Jeana Tomasino

singers conducted their wardrobe changes onstage, behind a scrim, allowing audiences to see their silhouettes.

They headed to Vegas and performed for *The Mike Douglas Show*, did a set on the nascent Playboy Channel (a stop for other musical acts as well, including Merle Haggard), and were booked at various Playboy Clubs, including the casino in Atlantic City, where Michele Drake remembers zero-degree temperatures outside and a lack of heat onstage — not to mention one bone-crunching set in particular. "I grabbed a guy's tie, slipped and fell and broke my index finger," says Drake. The next night she persevered, gripping her mike despite the splint on her injured digit.

Billboard sent a reporter to Atlantic City to cover the act, though he seemed to be more interested in the Playmates themselves than in their singing: "There was not much skin to see. Instead, they were perky and wholesome in the peekaboo Playboy manner, just slightly naughty. They sang about their favorite brands of designer jeans."

• • •

The late months of 1981 brought the group even more exposure through two major holiday-related television productions: a New Year's Eve performance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, during which they played White's song and discussed posing for PLAYBOY, and an appearance on *George Burns's (Early) Early, Early, Christmas Special*, for which they performed in several skits and sang "Jingle Bells," among other numbers.

May 1967 Playmate Anne Randall (now Stewart) joined the group for the Christmas taping, stepping in for Jeana Tomasino (November 1980). Stewart, already established as a film and TV actress, was game, but she was older than her cohorts and disliked the opening sketch, for which she and the other Playmates were required to don "antlers," pull a gift-laden sleigh and tap their "hooves" on command.

"My family was furious at me because I was hiding behind everybody," Stewart says, "but I was 37 and wearing reindeer antlers, stamping with my foot! I was humiliated." Today she looks back fondly on the episode and the opportunity to do a vaudeville routine with comedy legend Burns, who seems to have charmed the whole group with a vibe Tough describes as "dirty old man — but in a very polite and respectful way."

The television shows had gotten them some much-needed attention, but the group still wasn't taking off. Around this time Tough decided she couldn't put the rest of her career on hold any longer. She recalls that the breaking point for her came after a famous country crooner, who had caught the Singing Playmates' act in Los Angeles, sent a couple of producers to work on demos with them. "I walked in and they had ordered a case of Cristal champagne — on our ticket — and they were doing coke on the soundboard and flirting with the girls. It cost a lot of money, and I didn't see much work get done that night," Tough says. For her, it was time to say good-bye.

The rest of the group soldiered on, doing international shows in places like Japan and the Philippines. "Things were a little dicey," Sorenson remembers about the Manila trip. "It was martial law there at that time, and we were pretty sure we were being followed. There were guys with machine guns on every corner."

By 1983 the group was recording demos in Los Angeles, but their momentum was fading. "We were moving more mainstream, a little bit more pop," says Sorenson. "The last stuff we did was really good, and then everything fell apart, unfortunately."

"Let's just put it this way: Life was happening to everybody," Drake says. "There's no blame. But it is a shame that we didn't go any further. The type of act we had would have been perfect for a USO tour."

Nearly four decades later, many of the members remain in contact. "We were all really close," says Tough. "We saw each other five days a week, eight hours a day. It was a lot of fun, and I'm really happy I did it."

"The group was like a little family," says Sorenson. "It was an exciting time, and the Singing Playmates were a part of that." Though the curtain came down on that era of Playboy history, the story of the Singing Playmates will live on. Alexa and Siri, take note. ■

Vintage Advisor

Good advice is timeless, so we called on our Advisor to revisit a question of eternal interest (one a reader asked in 1975): how to keep a woman's attention in bed

FROM THE JULY PLAYBOY

Have you ever noticed how hard it is for some women to concentrate on sex? My girlfriend has the opposite of a one-track mind — she can get derailed by noisy neighbors, unfinished chores or the proverbial bread crumbs in bed. Once she loses her momentum, it takes her a while to get started again and, frankly, I can't always postpone my own pleasure for that long. Is her wandering attention a sign that she is inhibited or that she just isn't interested?—E.Y.

The man who said don't eat crackers in bed never dated anyone from Georgia, but he did have a point— possibly the same one made by the grim tale "The Princess and the Pea." Mistresses on mattresses are easily distracted during sex. Psychologists may see the evasive action as an "anxiety motivated defense" or a "culturally induced inhibition," but Kinsey suggested that such behavior goes beyond the bedroom: "Cheese crumbs spread in front of a copulating pair of rats may distract the female but not the male ... When cattle are interrupted during coitus, it is the cow that is more likely to be disturbed, while the bull may try to continue with coitus." Furthermore, female cats have been known to investigate mouse holes during intercourse. (We had a partner who used to do that — damn irritating, but new baseboards broke her of the habit.) Many women rate "privacy and freedom from intrusion" second only to "quality of relationship with partner" as a factor in their sexual satisfaction. Bear that in mind and find an appropriate setting for your next tryst (bank vaults and fallout shelters are great favorites). Also, you may find that if your girlfriend concentrates on something — music or an erotic fantasy — she can "distract the distracter" and mainline on the cannonball express.

OUR ADVISOR REFLECTS

Omnipresent smartphones, social media, e-mail, internet — we have a lot more to be distracted by today than we did in 1975. Frequently our minds are elsewhere, focused on just about everything besides what we're actually doing — even when we're engaging in the most intimate things possible.

Personally, I've never noticed a woman's attention wandering during sex (then again, I've slept with only a handful of women). I admit that I've occasionally found myself distracted during sex with men — suddenly contemplating the general absurdity of existence, trying not to laugh when my partner makes that weird noise or noticing my six-pound Brussels Griffon staring at me from inches away with judgment in his eyes — but then I'm right back in the moment, absorbed in the throes of passion and racking up orgasms.

What makes one go from fully engaged to sidetracked by the proverbial cheese crumb? I turned to an expert to find out. "If you're going to have sex, you may as well show up for it. It's not sufficient for your body to just go through the motions," says psychologist Lori Brotto, who literally wrote the book on the topic: *Better Sex Through Mindfulness*. "If it's not satisfying, it makes sense that you'll lose interest. It doesn't mean you're losing interest in sex. It means you're losing interest in the sex you're having." Ideally, sex is a permeating and immersive experience, with mind and body working in unison. Just as communication is essential to a successful long-term relationship, so too is a figurative dialogue between your brain and body. If one is not engaged, the other will check out too. Plenty of guys worry about how they look mid-thrust, but women are more prone to anxiety than men are and have higher instances of depression and lower rates of desire. It's no surprise that these issues slip between the sheets in the form of distraction.

How to quell our restless minds, if only for a solid seven minutes? The better you get at compartmentalizing, the better sex you'll have.

"Science tells us mindfulness is the most powerful way of cultivating sexual desire in people," says Brotto. In other words, you can meditate your way to better banging. If you or your partner is having trouble being in the moment, pick a time to practice meditation for 10 or 15 minutes every day. Apps like Headspace or Calm can help guide your progress; for the unplugged version, try a meditation class. The important thing is to work toward creating the right mind-set to enjoy and find pleasure in sex as it's taking place.

Still worried your partner may have lost interest in you? Begin a conversation with her and talk it out. This is a chance to examine your relationship, in bed and as a whole. Just as in 1975, studies still show that relationship quality has a major impact on a woman's sexual function, and in solid relationships, people talk. They talk about sex, from favorite fantasies to potential fetishes to specific proclivities and preferences. (Could you write a thesis on her orgasms? If not, do your research. Thoroughly.) They also talk about everything else, including banal things such as who does what housework. If a happy relationship is the ultimate goal, perhaps you should take it upon yourself to tell the neighbors to keep it down. Better yet, help out more with those chores. She's picking up on your energy as much as you're noticing hers, so make an effort to set the right tone and be as attentive as possible. Now that's advice to last the ages.—*Anna del Gaizo*

The Rabbit in Paradise

Christened in 1965, our first international club kicked off an especially heady chapter in Playboy history

In early 1964, Playboy was riding high on the success of its nascent network of clubs in cities as far flung as Chicago, New York, Phoenix, Baltimore, Cincinnati and New Orleans — a ventable galaxy of nighttime hot spots. Business was better than good. The company's net sales and revenue topped $30 million, and executives continued to dream big. It was time for an international club, one that would add something new to the Playboy mix: overnight accommodations. For the first Playboy hotel, they turned their eyes southward.

Jamaica had less than two years earlier transitioned from British rule to independence, and its young government was hungry for foreign investment. The gears started turning in Playboy founder Hugh Hefner's mind, and in January 1964 the company paid $2.75 million for a beachfront property on the island's north coast. More than $1 million went into renovations to bring the resort up to Playboy standards. Bunnies were flown in from the U.S. to train locals in the art of the Bunny dip, perch and stance; it was Hefner's goal to eventually have a majority-Jamaican staff. (He also wanted to be sure they were taken care of, and the company boasted that "new health and welfare benefits, which the club provides its employees, represent a first in the Jamaica hotel industry.")

The resulting slice of luxury, nestled in the lush Caribbean rain forest outside Ocho Rios, was christened the Playboy Club Hotel and opened to great fanfare in January 1965. The company flew in a stable of lucky journalists for the official weeklong launch. Jamaican prime minister Alexander Bustamante attended opening night, as did official representatives of Queen Elizabeth II.

With more than 200 rooms — 160 air-conditioned units in the main building and 44 lanai rooms on the beach — the resort was set up to handle crowds. Guests were spoiled for choice of activity. Snorkeling, scuba diving, boating, waterskiing and fishing (in a cove known as Bunny Bay) were on offer. There was horseback riding, tennis and shuffleboard. Cruises in a glass-bottom boat, tours to the nearby Dunn's River Falls — a 600-foot-tall cataract — and the luscious Fern Gully; dollar-bet pari-mutuel goat races — and for those who preferred indoor recreation, a full room-service menu.

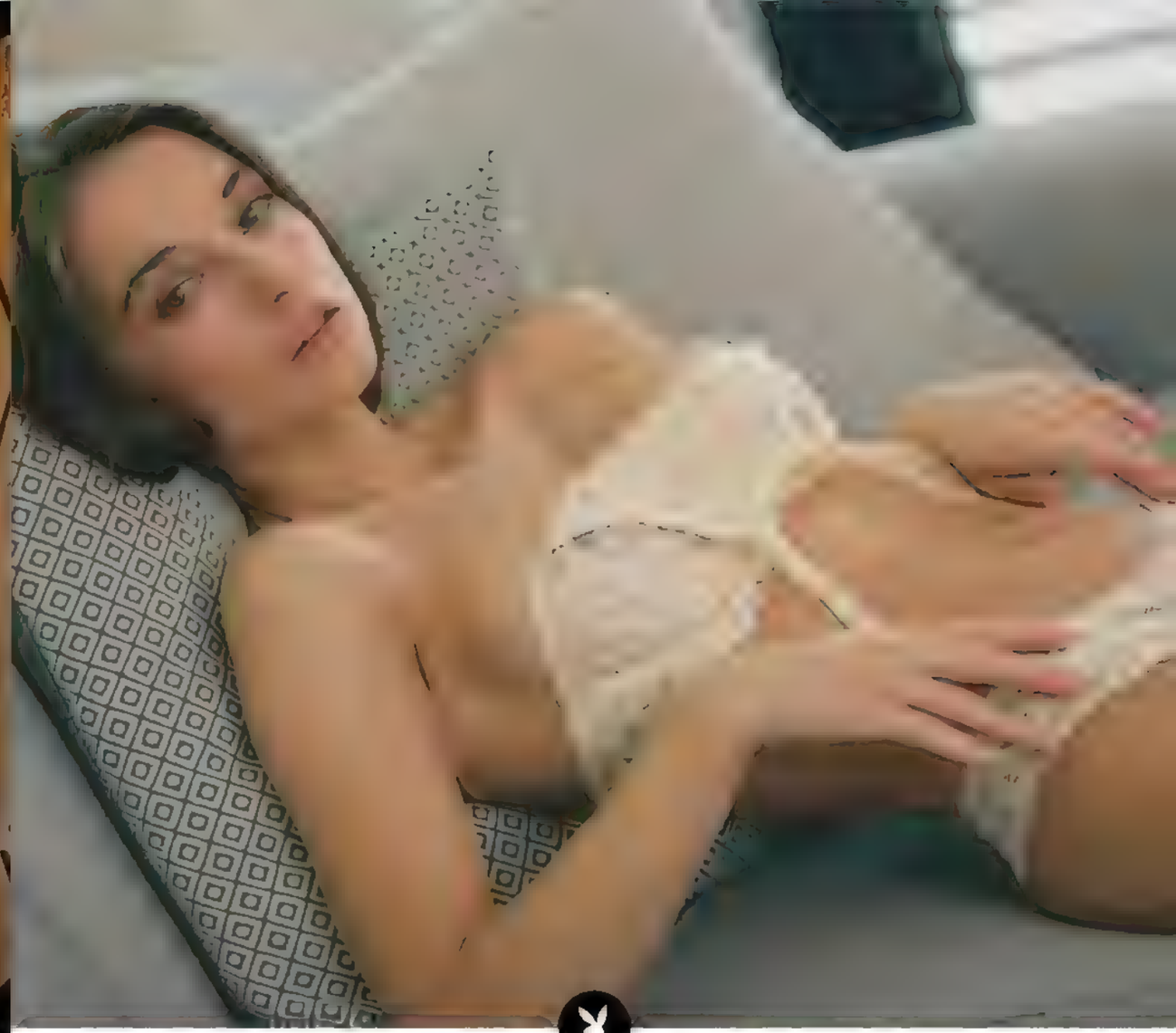
Alongside regular vacationers, corporations including 3M and General Electric booked time at the resort — as did "the entire officer complement of the USS Fearless," according to VIP magazine. Attendance was surely goosed by full-page ads in PLAYBOY, which in 1965 had a circulation of 3.5 million.

The warm reception for the Jamaica outpost kicked the company's confidence into overdrive. In the late 1960s and early 1970s several huge hotel complexes went up: in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin (360 rooms), Chicago (400 rooms), Miami Beach (500 rooms) and Great Gorge, New Jersey (700 rooms). Initially the Jamaica and Wisconsin locations did well, but not the others, and it became clear that, for all its glamour, the empire was overextended. As executive Victor Lownes later recalled, "I only wish Jamaica had flopped. If Jamaica had flopped, they wouldn't have made all those other big mistakes."

By the mid-1970s the island's fortunes had shifted as well, the political situation increasingly unstable. In March 1977, the resort was shuttered, bringing to a close Playboy's dozen years of tropical paradise. Still, with all due respect to Lownes, the club saga is a reminder that Playboy would be nothing without big dreams.

Preceding pages: *Playboy's first resort boasted an 800-foot-long white-sand beach. Inset: The famed one-piece Bunny corset was updated for outdoor service. Resort Bunnies sported two-piece waterproof suits.* ***This page, top:*** *Playboy's club magazine described the Dunn's River Falls experience as a "safe but slippery upward climb from boulder to boulder through the misty spray to the top of the falls and down again." **Middle:** With a view of the distinctive yellow-and-white rotunda of the main dining room and the bay beyond, this romantic spot was nicknamed the Bunny's Nest. **Left:** The Shipwreckers, the resort's roving calypso band, provided live poolside music.*

Above: *More than two dozen Bunnies staffed the club's five bars and other dining areas. The drinks menu included everything from Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee to cocktails such as the Rabbit Punch—a rum, fruit juice and Galliano concoction. The versatile Bunnies led lessons on "all the latest Latin and American dances," as well as how to limbo.* ***Below left:*** *Snorkelers consider an underwater kiss in the reef-protected cove.* ***Below right:*** *Guests could play volleyball on the beach or in the Olympic-size pool. Come nighttime, the pool was the scene of a synchronized water show.*



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MIMI

Jade

Hi, I'm Mimi. I'm a model and chemistry major in Los Angeles, California.

Tell us something surprising about you?
I moved to Denali, Alaska when I was 18 to explore and work a summer job. It's one of my favorite places in the world.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes! I'm absolutely honored! It's been a dream of mine to be in Playboy since before I started modeling.

What inspires you?
I'm inspired by anyone that's down to explore their creative side. I love art, music, and dance.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
My parents got me in to it when I was younger and I love that it's been a creative outlet for me ever since.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
Marilyn Monroe is my favorite! I love how effortlessly sexy and carefree she is. Her first Playboy cover is iconic.

What are some of your hobbies?
I love doing anything outdoors. One of my very favorite things to do is to go fishing or watch football!

Name three things on your bucket list?
It's my dream to have a family someday, to keep traveling and exploring new places and to see the Dolphins win a Super Bowl.

Turn-ons
When a guy makes me laugh, or when he teaches me something new.

Turn-offs
It's a huge turn off when a guy doesn't have manners or is rude to other people.

Describe to us your perfect date
The perfect date is to cuddle up and watch movies!

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
I'm half Norwegian so it'd be cool to visit Oslo in Norway.

What is your mantra?
To live every day full of gratitude.

CHASING THE LAST LAUGH

One year after earning the disdain of Republicans, journalists and a few liberal women, **Michelle Wolf** is ready to do it again—and maybe help the country too

BY **STEPHEN RODRICK**

STYLING BY STEPHANIE TRICOLA AT HONEY ARTISTS. DRESS BY PRABAL GURUNG. JEWELRY BY MICHELE VARIAN

Michelle Wolf is not a fan of Donald Trump humor. She thinks it's all a bit hacky. "I personally hate Trump jokes," says Wolf, who a year ago vowed to burn down the annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner and then did so in such definitive fashion nothing was left except scorched tuxedos. She doubles down: "I have not heard a good Trump joke in years."

Alas, on a recent frozen night at New York's legendary Comedy Cellar, three of the four comedians who take the stage before Wolf unleash Trump jokes. They are all lame. Then Wolf makes her way to the mike through a maze of tables occupied by drunk accountants and couples on first dates. She's wearing blue jeans, a gray sweater and a muted pair of Nikes. (The long distance runner has become known for performing in glam high topped sneaks, her collection being her concession to consumerism.) Her trademark voluminous curly red hair—which Wolf once described on *The Daily Show With Trevor Noah* as a hybrid of classic Annie and modern African American Annie—has been straightened.

Wolf is working on new material, which means her routine is semi-embargoed. Suffice it to say, there are no Trump jokes. Her 2017 HBO special, Nice Lady, featured bits on period farts, the impossibility of the modern woman having it all and a theory that men's testicles resemble a goblin's coin purse. Her new material is in the same unfiltered vein.

At one point she seems to suggest — in a high pitched voice she jokes often attracts stray dogs — that men don't need to worry about the women's movement because women have a tendency to devour their own. For anyone who paid attention to the aftermath of Wolf's Correspondents' Dinner set, it's obvious why sharing this is not in breach of the embargo.

When Wolf finishes a few minutes later, she leaves the claustrophobic basement to applause exponentially louder than the combined clapping for all the dudes with the Trump jokes. It was her 10th show of the week.

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Before April 28, 2018, you may have recognized Michelle Wolf only from bits she did on *Late Night With Seth Meyers* and *The Daily Show*. She'd written jokes for Chris Rock's 2016 Academy Awards monologue and nabbed her HBO special a year

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DAVID URBANKE**

"I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR MORAL COMPASS. I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR PHILOSOPHER."

later. But last year's Correspondents' Dinner propelled her into a different orbit, one filled with Fox News condemnations and finger-wagging from professional women who thought she'd been too harsh on White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a proven serial liar. Some even suggest the WHCA's decision to have presidential biographer Ron Chernow deliver this year's keynote was in response to Wolf's polarizing set. It's the first time a comedian hasn't performed at the event since 2003.

There's just one thing Michelle Wolf does not give a fuck. She knew exactly what she was doing.

When Wolf was first approached to speak at the dinner—D.C.'s chummy get-together between plush-talking heads and the plutocrats and politicians they're supposedly holding accountable— she thought there must have been a mistake. "They were like, 'We'll get a woman,' " she tells me backstage at another of her shows, this time at Nashville's Zanies. "I'm sure they thought, She won't do anything crazy. She'll be nice." Wolf smiles. "They should have done more research on me."

While Wolf is wary of her comedy epitaph becoming "The Girl From the Correspondents' Dinner," she's happy to set the record straight and settle some scores. Before accepting the gig, Wolf talked with Meyers, her ex-boss and mentor, who had given the dinner keynote in 2011, and asked if she should do it. He told her yes but warned about performing in a room with bad acoustics and drunken robber barons barely paying attention.

"I made the decision to not cater to them," Wolf tells me. "I don't like what they're doing right now. I don't think it's the right time for them to have a chuckle at the way things are going."

Before she took the stage, a comedian friend slipped her a note: "Burn it down." Another texted, "If they're cringing, you're doing it right." Shortly before the ceremony started, she ran into Margaret Talev, a Bloomberg reporter and WHCA board member. That's when she realized the organizers were in for a shock. Talev asked if Wolf would be wearing a gown. She told Talev she was going to wear a suit.

"Margaret said, 'Oh, I'm wearing pants too. It's like my little stick it to the man.' I thought to myself, Oh, you have no idea what is coming," Wolf says.

What has been forgotten in the swirl of post-dinner contretemps is that Wolf was an equal-opportunity slagger. She went after Al Franken, who had been forced to resign after allegations of groping. "Things are changing, men are being held accountable. Al Franken was ousted. That one really hurt liberals. I believe it was the great Ted Kennedy who said, 'Wow, that's crazy. I murdered a woman.' "

She threw a zinger at liberal saint Rachel Maddow, calling her "the Peter Pan of MSNBC, but instead of never growing up, she never gets to the point." She went after MSNBC's *Morning Joe* hosts: "I watch *Morning Joe* every morning. We now know Mika and Joe are engaged. Congratulations, you guys. It's like when #MeToo works out."

Wolf also nailed the Trump Industrial Complex wherein the media wrings its hands over the president while gleefully amping his every movement for profit: "He's helped you sell your papers and your books and your TV. You helped create this monster, and now you're profiting off of him. If you're going to profit off of Trump, you should at least give him some money, because he doesn't have any."

But a year later, the post-game analysis remains critical of Wolf's purported woman-on-woman comedy crimes — not against Maddow or Mika Brzezinski but Sanders.

"We are graced with Sarah's presence tonight," said Wolf. Sanders sat a few feet away. "I have to say I'm a little starstruck. I love you as Aunt Lydia in *The Handmaid's Tale*." The room grumbled at the reference to a character who delights in oppressing other women. Wolf pressed on. "I actually really like Sarah. I think she's very resourceful. She burns facts, and then she uses that ash to create a perfect smoky eye. Like maybe she's born with it, maybe it's lies. It's probably lies."

Wolf left the stage to a confused reception. Then the social media monsters began breathing napalm.

The Hill called her "fame-hungry" and *The Hollywood Reporter* pushed out the headline MICHELLE WOLF GOES LOW WITH RAUNCHY HUMOR. Trump trashed her — which was to be expected — but then women in the press began coming to Sanders's defense. NBC majordomo Andrea Mitchell said Wolf owed Sanders an apology. New York Times reporter and Trump whisperer Maggie Haberman tweeted, "That @PressSec sat and absorbed intense criticism of her physical appearance, her job performance, and so forth, instead of walking out, on national television, was impressive."

Haberman's remarks earned the biggest eye roll from Wolf. "She's part of the problem; she's 100 percent access journalism," Wolf says, taking a sip of her drink (prosecco mixed with Aperol) and shaking her head in wonder. "Like Andrea Mitchell, Mika Brzezinski — they all came out and said things, and I was like, No, you guys just want to maintain your access — especially Maggie. She's working on a book. They also had to say it to take attention away from my calling them out for using Trump to make money."

Wolf points out that Sanders didn't stand earlier in the ceremony when reporters received awards. She explains that she wasn't making fun of Sanders's appearance; if Wolf regrets anything, it is not adding an extra beat expressing her sincere appreciation for Sanders's makeup. (Sanders politely declined PLAYBOY's request for comment.) She also notes that no one complained about her jokes citing Paul Ryan's lack of balls and Chris Christie's weight.

"What still bothers me is the way so many in the press criticized

her," Meyers says. "She wasn't a contest winner. She was a comedian they hired based on her body of work. Why should she tamp down her style to fit some weird idea of decorum most people don't care about?"

A month later Netflix premiered *The Break With Michelle Wolf*, which she executive produced. Some say Wolf's set was designed to drum up excitement for her show, but with only a 10-episode order — consider how many shows Conan O'Brien needed before he got good — *The Break* had little chance to succeed. It has some bright moments, however, including her roast of the comedic political lectures popularized by John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* and Meyers's *Late Night* segment "A Closer Look." On *The Break*, Wolf skewers the format, calling hers "Segment Time."

"It doesn't necessarily make you think more or change your opinion at all," says Wolf of the format. "It just reinforces what you think, and we're living in a climate right now where things are so off-balance that people just want someone to say a logical thing. I don't think that's the right way to do comedy."

She starts to laugh.

"But they still have shows, so what do I know?"

• • •

The great irony in Wolf being trashed by powerful women is that she has built her entire career highlighting, in a sometimes graphic manner, how unfair life can be for women, whether it's working mothers or Hillary Clinton. On her HBO special, she says, "If you're a woman in power and think you're well liked, you are so wrong. There are e-mails to prove it." She has described HRC as unlikable — the kind of person you run to the bathroom to avoid at a party. But she believes that's how a woman in power has to be. She will never come off like a good old boy.

"I would have loved if Hillary had been like, 'Hey, you guys are being real sexist talking about my smile, and yeah, I fucked up on the e-mails, okay, but I'm a grandmother, and I know what I'm talking about. I've been here forever. I'm super qualified,' " she says.

I ask Wolf if she's had feminist mentors. "That's an interesting question. I don't think I've ever been asked that," she says. Instead of naming a comedian or an author, Wolf focuses on her childhood in "the middle middle class" of Hershey, Pennsylvania. She idolized her two older brothers and wanted to go wherever they went, which meant pretending she was one of the dudes. "I don't even think my brothers knew I had a period," Wolf says. "It was one of those things where I was just trying so hard to fit in with the boys that it was like, *They can't hear about this.*"

Unlike Chris Rock, who was doing stand-up in his teens, or Judd Apatow, who interviewed comedians at the comedy club where his mother worked before his testicles had dropped, Wolf came to comedy later. She grew up a track athlete and cites that as a source of motivation when trying to write new jokes. ("You might have set a personal best, but they just move the bar higher until you fail," she says.) She went to the College of William & Mary, joining a track and field team there, but injured herself, that ended her sports career.

It left her wondering what to do next. The first thought wasn't comedy. "I knew I wanted to make money," she says, citing a comfortable childhood during which she was surrounded by friends who were supremely more comfortable than she. After graduating with a kinesiology degree, she went to work at Bear Stearns during the Great Recession and saw older colleagues lose everything. To this day, Wolf doesn't trust the stock market; her money sits in a noninvested Schwab account.

She went with friends to a taping of *Saturday Night Live* and was hooked. She started taking improv classes and switched to stand-up about seven years ago. She eventually got noticed by Meyers. "Everything about her path to comedy seemed like it would be a plus for us — passionate, hard worker, risk taker," he says. "Plus we fell in love with her lilting, almost hypnotic voice."

Wolf worked for Meyers for two years before Trevor Noah poached her. While she takes pains to point out the men who've helped her, she recognizes it wasn't a level playing field.

"There are plenty of male comics who have kids and go on the road. Women wait to have kids later, when they're more successful and can afford help," says Wolf. One of the other double standards that chafes her is what she perceives to be a woman's need to answer for a man's behavior. Recently, Wolf encountered picketers after appearing on a bill at the Comedy Cellar with the dethroned Louis C.K., someone Wolf once opened for on the road. She endured women asking how she could call herself a feminist and have her name on the same show as the serial masturbator.

"Journalists just want a headline about Louis, and to me, that's not helpful and definitely not my responsibility," says Wolf. This is the only moment during our interview that she gets testy. "It's not my job to clean up the mess of something a man did. I'm not going to sacrifice my spots at a place where I'm most productive just to prove a point that's not going to go anywhere."

This year, Wolf has indeed not sacrificed her spots. She's touring the U.S. through May and hops overseas this summer. She has auditioned for a few acting roles, but most of her time is spent working on her next special and tour. She recently ran a 50-mile ultra-marathon and found herself turning jokes over in her mind until mile 42, when she nearly passed out. "You have to keep moving or it can all go away," she says.

And she watches the 2020 presidential race with trepidation. While her comedy features support for abortion rights and improving living conditions for mothers, she dreads any female candidate making that her platform when so many families struggle to put food on the table. "I hear Kirsten Gillibrand is going to run on gender," she says. "That's a terrible idea, because you're going to get only the people who care about that. You can't eat equality. You're going to vote for the candidate who can get you a job."

Wolf knows this sounds bad — perhaps slightly anti-woman. She faces her palms out in the universal "Who knows?" pose.

"I'm not supposed to be your moral compass," she says. "I'm not supposed to be your philosopher. I'm not supposed to be your religion. I'm just supposed to be the person who says the thing that makes you laugh. And maybe makes you think differently."

Wolf pauses for a moment, pushing back her straightened hair.

"But most of all, makes you laugh." ■

New Old Expression: "Useless as a hound in a skiff."

MELANIE JÄGER

FRANK KOLLBRUNNER OF SENSUAL-PHOTO.CH
LUIS GOMEZ @UNIVERSE137STUDIOS

I am 26 Years o d, I was born in Austria and current y i live in Swiss. I grew up at a Farm. Right now, I am working in a Laboratory in a big Company

About me.
I`m the typ ca country g r

My hobbies and interests.
Horse rid ng, motorcyc ng, in ine skating, firefighter, modeling, wakeboarding farming

My goals and career ambitions.
Wherever the way eads me, the important th ng is that Life stays exciting Maybe in Ho lywood

Who inspires me?
Positive, happy peop e

My favourite quote.
If it fee s good then do it

Turn on.
Ta guys, positivity, atex

Turn off.
Chest hair, moustache, machos, pubic hair

The perfect date
A romantic r de on Horses over the beach

My girl crush
Ange ina Jo ie

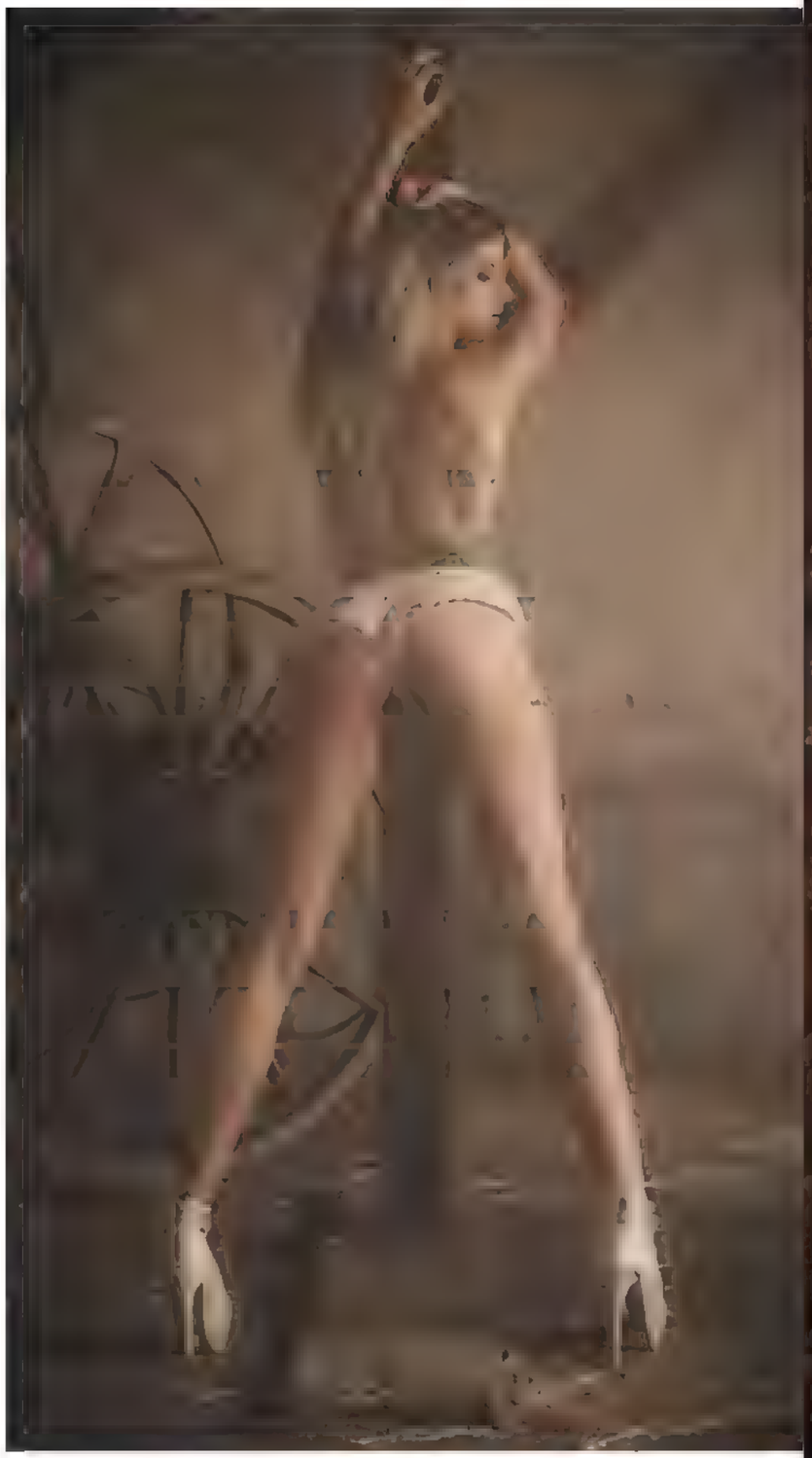
My favourite food
Pizza

My biggest fear.
A one n the woods at night

One destination I'd love to visit.
Amer ca

I'm not embarrassed to say.
That I am not a good girl

You can fo ow me on Instagram @sensualmode me , Facebook Me Jäger



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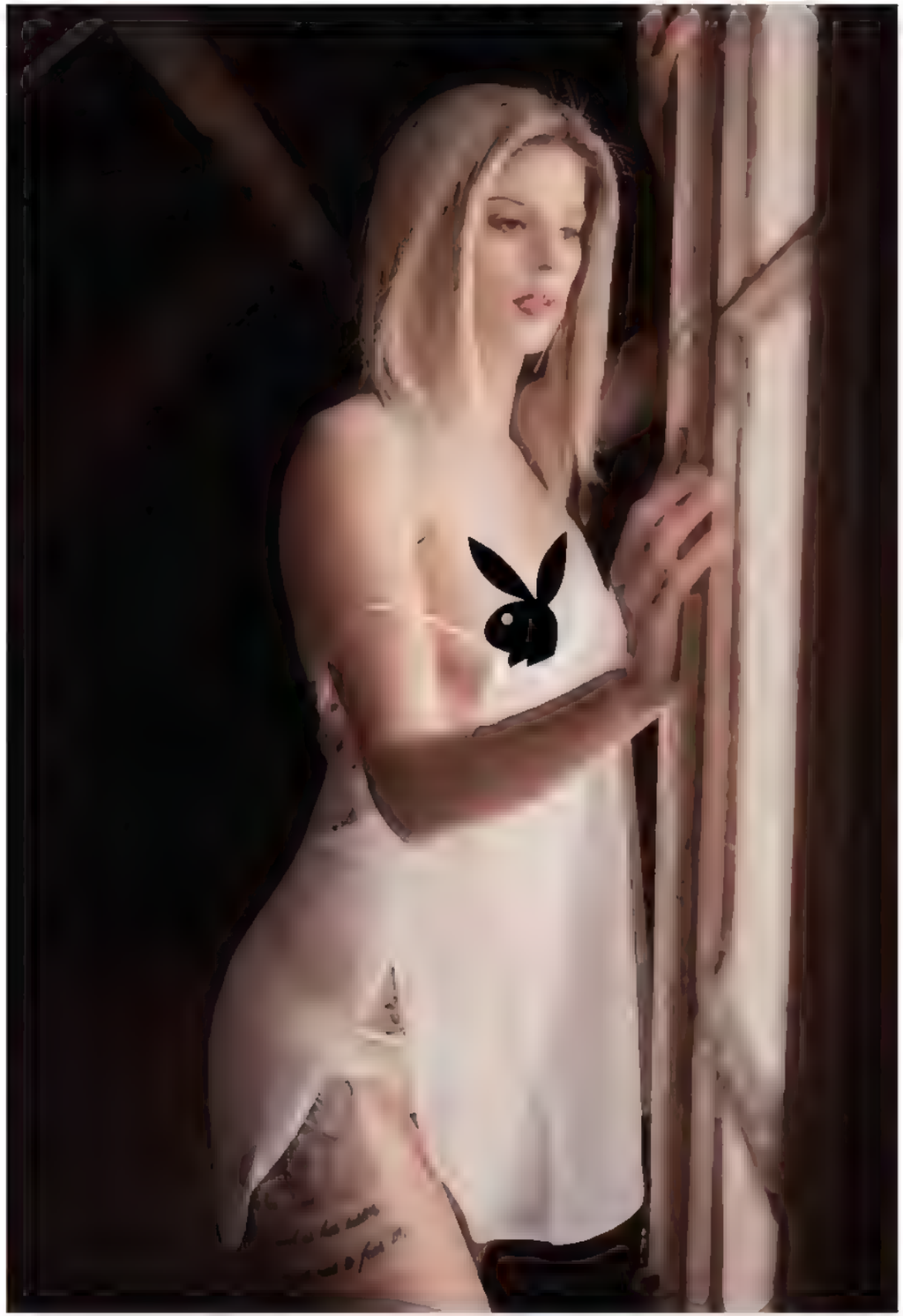
Height 175 cm
Weight 53 kg
Eye Colour: brown



WE ARE NOT HERE

BY **DAVID GILBERT**

There I am, 24 years old, playing 18, a young 18, emerging from the lake in just T-shirt and panties. I will be murdered soon. I am sitting next to my murderer. His name is Charlie Mooks, which is an ideal name for a murderer but a terrible name for an actor. Charlie hugged me when he saw me even though I haven't seen Charlie in decades. But we are bonded by that knife across my throat. Charlie's still huge, with more belly and less chin, patches of rosacea running across his face. He's a grandfather now. "I've got five grown children," he told me in the green room, shaking his head at this amazing fact. No one ever believes how many grown children they have. As Charlie talked, I recalled the Sephora I had passed when I was getting coffee. I knew the perfect moisturizer for him, an energizing vitamin C day cream. Maybe a protein booster serum as well. "I sell insurance, but don't worry, I'm not going to hit you up," Charlie said, after which he indicated good humor by laughing. He always was a terrible actor. But he's a naturally frightening presence: bald and dented, as close to being deformed without actually being deformed. Flakes of dead skin cling to the sides of his nose. I want to reach up and scoop the crud free. Like cleaning leaves from a gutter. I would show him. He would be amazed.

Another middle-aged man-boy steps forward, and I brace for conversation, imagining a cue card printed across his chest. He seems to be wearing a subtle costume which registers as a vague misunderstanding of how clothes should work in the world, particularly with his body type. He resembles a pear atop a pumpkin. I smile to put him at ease, but he's not nervous. He's paid decent money for this Horrorfest encounter: $50 for the personalized photo, $20 per additional item signed. He leans in close, the transactional nature breaking normal bounds. His complexion is cratered around the cheekbones, and I picture the moon in a fedora. He has a leather sheath strapped to his thigh, and I assume a plastic machete is tucked inside, though the handle has the matte finish of real metal. "Hello there," I say as though *there* is his name.

"Really cool to meet you," he says, nodding, "really cool, oh yeah, wow."

His voice surprises me. It is false yet effective, its smooth tone reminding me of late night DJs listened through clock radios: me a teenager in bed, constructing saviors in my head, soft and sympathetic, unlike this face before me, which is waxing gibbous with unkempt sideburns. For some reason I expect he can play the harmonica.

"Nice to meet you too," I say.

I already have the Sharpie dangling over my chest, waiting.

"I was 10 when I first saw Night's Scream," he says.

"Oh," I say.

They almost always tell me their age, particularly when their age was young, as though this indicates precociousness rather than lax parenting. A few had seen the movie in an actual theater, usually with an older brother, or snuck in with friends, or simply strolled in, since this was the mid-1970s and whatever was happening on the streets was probably worse. But most had caught me through the years on cable, or on VHS and then DVD, or now streamed on demand, so they watched me while sitting in living rooms or finished basements, puddled in beanbags, draped across chairs. They convened in pubescent groups. Sleepover scares. Occasionally girls joined in because they had been dared and being frightened with boys was the gateway to being a woman. Or the girls saved me for their own intimate affairs, after years of being tempted by soft-core chills — tonight, they would go all in; tonight, they would see all that blood. Those girls have the best screams. The horror seems almost joyous for finally being public and permissible. But there are few girls in line here.

"I watched with my dad," he says.

"Oh, yeah?" I say, Sharpie still dangling over my chest, still waiting.

"Because I used to be scared of moths," he says, "a total fraidy cat."

"Well, moths can be scary," I say, which I believe is true.

"But I'm not scared of them anymore," he says.

I conjure piranha-like moths swarming his head, but all I say is "That's great."

"I became scared of other things, worse things," he says.

"It's a scary world," I say.

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

The others are better at this than I am. Certainly more experienced. Charlie Mooks begins by asking their names so he can start the signing and the handing back and the moving along process, formal yet friendly. But Charlie has the longest line and the most committed fan base. As tribute, some wear cheap donkey masks. The more extreme do the prosthetic makeup underneath, with the eyes and the teeth and the drool.

They seem to really love the drool. These people also visit my line and greet their first victim by braying, and I pretend-gasp like these are the neighborhood kids on Halloween. I try thinking nice thoughts, like look how creative they are, how passionate, but in the end they're all my murderers. I make a point of writing their names over my poking nipples.

Stanley. Frankie. Miguel — constructing a bra from black felt. And my old ridiculous stage name takes care of the panties and the conspicuous darkling V-shaped mound. When I dot the i in my belly button I think of Tania, roughly this size, resting in there. Then I hand the photograph back, having dressed myself in their desire. I've noticed Amy and Beth and Laura and Kim gauging the number of people in my line, ordering themselves after my early iconic death. I'm especially popular because this is my first convention. Even Karen seems to keep track. Karen who was the only survivor, who had the career before and after, until getting older took her life. These conventions are her main occupation. Plus she sells vitamins on Facebook. She also dabbles in real estate. She's the kind of person who calls herself an entrepreneur, who has this printed on business cards. Karen Locke, Entrepreneur. In the green room she greeted me like we were reunited best friends, and I had one of those moments where I had to find the person I once knew within the fright of aging. I tried keeping my expression neutral; I even said "You look wonderful" with stubborn conviction, like the situation was touch and go and she needed my support. But I understood the sentiment was contagious. Karen regarding me under the same grim prognosis. We were old. And we would soon watch ourselves during the special 40th anniversary screening, would hear the audience laugh and cheer every outrageous kill, recite particular lines of dialogue, while we slunk lower in our designated row, feeling the loss beyond the blood. Even when flayed, our skin was glorious.

"I didn't want you to die," he tells me.

"You were watching the wrong movie then," I say.

"But my dad knew you were going to get it," he says.

"Dads," I say.

"I've come from Topeka," he says.

"That's a long trip," I say.

"But I don't live in Topeka," he says.

"Oh," I say.

"I just flew from there," he says.

"Right," I say.

"To be here," he says.

"Oh, well, welcome," I say as though I represent the chamber of commerce and I hope he will enjoy his stay in our fair city. I don't live here myself. Not anymore. Not since my downtown days when things were fun and strange, when being irresponsible had this varnish of liberation. I was braver back then. I recall being fierce and for the most part lucky. I ran in circles that ran in circles with semi-famous people.

Patti Smith. Willem Dafoe. David Byrne — until their centrifugal force threw me into more obscure corners. I also burned some bridges. This is standard-issue nostalgia, while in front of me looms someone who seems congested with an undiagnosed dairy allergy. I notice his breath. It smells of feet. Like his tongue is barefoot in his sneaker mouth. "So what's your name?" I ask.

He thinks for a moment, then he says, "Bob."

"Bob?"

"Yes," Bob says, "Bob."

"Okay, Bob it is." I orient the photo against my looming Sharpie. The organizers came up with these publicity stills, which are retrofitted for the cause since *Night's Scream* had neither the budget nor the prestige to warrant an on-set photographer. And certainly nobody asked my permission, or my opinion, on the particular image used. I had signed away my rights for $500 and was frankly amused by the opportunity, having already debased myself multiple times for free. So there I am, drunk and fritzed on Quaaludes since this is late May in Maine and Terry Lester has pumped me with whatever might keep me pliable. But I'm messing up my entrance via freezing water like the Lady of the Lake's slutty sister, which Terry is treating as the most important shot in his dumb movie — me trying again and again in sheer panties and child-sized T-shirt, Terry screaming, me on the verge of hypothermia though the crew has diagnosed my distress as spoiled-bitch syndrome. Only Charlie Mooks cares. Between takes he warms me in his meaty, mole-flecked arms, his pulsing midsection giving me the dick version of CPR. "There, there," he says, as he rubs my back. He's stoned and has been offering me mushrooms whenever we're alone. But the truth is, I have never looked as good as I look in this photo. It's undeniable. I can see the longing in my eyes and, buried deep, the electric rage that tightens the focus into the brutalized woman the world wants me to be. I'm staring at the assholes on the shore, all of them amateur sadists. I am alone, and I am dying, and I am beautiful. Plus my body is perfect. Like absurdly perfect. I'm also four weeks from learning I'm pregnant. Maybe this is why I'm glowing. Or maybe I'm investing myself with meaning. Searching for signs and symbols. Tania inside me holding on for dear life. Oh sweetie, I think, for her and for me, as I land the Sharpie on my forehead and write For and inscribe Bob across my breasts. I add below, *Don't come inside me, okay?* Which is cribbed from my last line of dialogue. That always gets them grinning. Then I finish with the flourish of *Zoe Palindromos*. This handle was foisted on me during my days in the art-slash-club scene, when queer men threatened pretty girls with stardom. Their homosexuality stood in for integrity. Eventually they fed us to photographers.

"Here you go" — I pause so I can land his name — "Bob."

In many ways I am still an actress.

Bob admires the photo. "You're my favorite here," he tells me.

"Oh, thanks," I say.

"I really hate when you die," Bob says.

"Yeah," I say, "but here I am."

Then Bob half-whispers, "I know your real name."

"Do you?" I say.

He nods. "Zoe Akeldama, from Massapequa, Long Island."

I remain cool and say, "*Ding ding ding.*"

"And then you were Zoe Lobeki, and then Zoe Marston and now Zoe Newhart who lives in Dos Rios Triangle Sacramento." Bob says this like he's in on the joke even though there's no identifiable joke. And while I know I exist on Wikipedia, on IMDb, on Fangoria and other websites dedicated to the horror genre, I have no idea how deep I might sink in the internet, how far this Bob character can reach into me. Political donations? Real estate transactions? Lawsuits filed? Has he hacked my Facebook page? My Instagram? Does he know that my irises are blooming?

"Well," I say, "thanks for coming," and I straighten up and regard the people waiting behind him, hoping they might provide relief. But they are more of the same. The zombie. The space alien. The amputee turning his loss into kicky special effect. The people in normal clothes appear even more sinister. I notice the rare young woman dressed in denim shorts and tank top — the kind of outfit I wore the night I was slaughtered. Who knows how this particular girl will be savaged? By spear? By pitchfork? By blunt force trauma via rock or log or whatever else is handy and vicious? If she is me, she can expect the kitchen knife across her throat while she's on top of her jock boyfriend — really fucking him good, as Terry commanded, like the best fuck of his life. It was night and we were in the woods, on a mattress hidden by ferns, and I remember the crew on the other side, their shabby voyeurism like the atmospheric disturbance before lightning — charged and obscurely dangerous yet impossible to really fear. Brad was beneath me, sweet Brad, who died of AIDS in the early 1990s. He was so nervous. And I wanted to make our moment seem real, wanted those pricks watching us to feel our brief humanity, so I improvised and told Brad not to come inside me, in order to ground things, to express our authenticity, while Charlie Mooks approached from behind, his massive blur stepping into donkey-masked distinction. The rest is well-known: Charlie grabs my chin and slits my throat. Blood pours down my chest, over my bare breasts — like tainted milk, as the script described. And then Charlie pushes me on top of Brad and turns us into his macabre bucking bronco — *hee-haw, hee-haw* — until Brad comes despite the awfulness from above. My postmortem is his postcoital. Brad would get his later, when he rushed and attacked Charlie with an ax. Lord, what fools these mortals be.

Bob reaches into his canvas satchel.

"I have something else for you," he says.

I'm expecting the *Night's Scream* poster, or the VHS tape, or even the PLAYBOY from after the movie was released. Those photos predate my cinematic debut, taken under the guise of the anti-artistic artistic nude, meaning raw and ordinary, meaning Harry Englander appreciated my unshaved armpits and my knees casually spread apart. I have signed all varieties of myself today. I have been a good sport, I think.

"Okay," I say.

But instead of these things, Bob places in front of me a yearbook. The cover is white with a series of curved strata, red and orange and yellow, bulging from a rounded core, like the geological representation of an eyeball. After a moment I realize what this is — the *Sachem* from 1972 — and I gasp loud enough for Charlie Mooks to glance over.

Bob is pleased. "I collect them," he says, "yearbooks of famous people."

I smile and tell Bob I'm hardly famous. I open the yearbook near the middle and am immediately greeted by era-specific hair. Us girls have long feathery manes, parted in the middle, framing faces beaming and wide. Our heads seem to tilt under the uniform weight. I had forgotten about this trend, or rather, had forgotten about the ubiquity of this trend. It's staggering. I can practically smell the Prell. The boys have a bit more variation. There are a few short-haired Republican types hello, Ryan Nellows — but even they are weedy around the edges, while the rest fall within the shoulder-length dude category. I'm struck by my instant familiarity with names and associated personalities. Kirsten Lee. Veronica Lemon. Anthony Looper. Every photo is like a paused frame of film. I can see Anthony's dimples deepen, Kirsten twirling her hair. "This is amazing," I say.

Bob reaches forward and turns a few pages. "There," he says.

I look for me but I am not there.

Then Bob points to a picture, bottom right.

I see a boy with a toothy smile and bushy black hair, like a mink hat with ear flaps.

"Jerry Seinfeld," Bob says.

Of course. Jerome Seinfeld. Right near Barbara Schein and Amy Schmidt. Jerry whom I hardly knew, yet I catch his smile corkscrewing into a smirk. There is post-1972 writing nearby — *To Bob, Thanks for the blast from the past, Jerry Seinfeld* — which streaks across Barbara and Amy like bratty graffiti.

"I got him to sign this a few years ago," Bob says.

"Uh-huh," I say.

"He got a real kick out of it," Bob says.

"I bet," I say.

"Do you know him?" Bob asks.

"Not really," I say. "It was a big school."

Bob then flips toward the beginning of the senior pictures and finds me nestled between Linda Abate and Roger Aledort. I am a cataract of pure blonde hair though I lack the easy smile of my classmates and instead edge toward mystery. But I was legend at Massapequa High. Jerome Seinfeld would've remembered me — they all would've remembered Zoe Akeldama. But I was too aloof to be popular, confusing beauty with maturity, and when I was done with the school, I was done with these people. But seeing this picture is like seeing a missing person posted on a milk carton or a post office bulletin board, f lashed on the six o'clock news, like something awful has happened and this is evidence of more innocent days. And it isn't just me. All the boys seem killed in Vietnam, all the girls murdered in the woods. The class of 1972 might as well be decomposing under groovy hair.

"There I am," I say.

I think of Tania, how she might see herself in my skeptical eyes, my dubious grin.

"You were a happy accident," Bob tells me. "I was going through the yearbook, just looking at the pictures, when I came across yours, and I was like, I think I know her, and then I was like, it's the girl from *Night's Scream*. I've seen the movie like a thousand times."

"Uh-huh," I say.

"And I thought, how cool to have both your autographs," Bob says.

"Sure," I say.

I'm holding the Sharpie over myself, wondering where to sign and what to write, when a thought comes to mind: Maybe I could keep the yearbook for the rest of the day; maybe over dinner I could show Tania this teenage glimpse of myself; maybe we could squeeze in an early laugh and this would loosen things up between us. She might even regard me with more humanity and less suspicion. Look, I could say, I was young once. I was not born your mother. So I ask Bob if there's any chance he might lend me the *Sachem*, just for the night, and afterward I could leave the yearbook with the front desk of my hotel. "My daughter would really get a kick out of this," I tell him.

Bob's face practically contorts in pain.

"Um," he says.

"I promise I'll leave it there."

"It's just——"

"I can give you my phone number, just in case," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Sure," I say, and I grab the already signed photo of myself and write on the back the name of my hotel and my phone number. I realize how this must look, and so I glance up and smile, but Bob seems to be checking the numbers against the numbers he already has scratched in his head. I notice Charlie Mooks's continued sideways curiosity. I wonder if he still thinks of me, if he envisions this Bob character strung up by the legs, a chain saw ready to split him in half.

"Thanks so much," I say. "I really appreciate it."

Bob takes the photo and reinspects the information. "You promise?" he asks.

"I promise," I say.

He slips the photograph back into his satchel.

"Okay," he says.

"Okay," I say.

"Bye," he says.

"Bye," I say.

Bob turns and heads back into the crowd, his hand resting on the hilt of his machete, as though he might need to cut his way through these other versions of himself.

• • •

Throughout the afternoon my phone buzzes with texts from Bob reconfirming the address of the hotel, the time of pickup tomorrow, or maybe tonight, buzz, buzz, buzz, a nd I t ext back my assurances in as few words as possible. But I'm amused. By five o'clock the cast of Night's Scream is done with our commitments, and we gather back in the green room to collect our belongings. The performance of the last five hours has left me gutted, as well as embarrassed for myself. All that smiling. The fake pleasant words. The put on enthusiasm. I feel even more distant from myself than normal, like my head is floating on a string. But the others seem invigorated by the residual fame. I do my best to linger and participate in their small talk, but the purpose of our being together fast evaporates and I get clammy in their company. I need fresh air. I need escape. I have no bygone fondness for these people. I'm like a pair of scissors saying good-bye.

Charlie Mooks insists on a hug. I can smell his deodorant fighting against the odor of wet leaves, and I think of myself rotting inside his massive bag of flesh. He squeezes me tight. I can sense his hard-on underneath — or the memory of his hard-on. "We're so glad you came," he says as he presses into my dead self.

"Me too," I lie.

"Hope to see you at one of these things again," he says.

"Yes," I say, knowing I will never do this again.

Charlie releases me, and I grab my things and wave a final good-bye. The rest of the gang are going for a drink, maybe multiple drinks, ha-ha-ha. Once I'm gone I know they will anatomize me, will compare me to the person I was back in Maine. How I paraded about. How I suffered. How I was the victim long before any blade crossed my throat. I can already hear them taking me apart. Dragging me to the ground. But at least I know I hated them first. Amy in her ridiculous red hat. Laura in her tacky vintage dress. Karen with her résumé on parade, how her life has never been better, how blessed she is, in her cheap Talbots blouse, the underarms pitted through.

• • •

Back in my hotel room I freshen up and then head uptown for dinner with Tania. There have been no new texts from Bob since the initial volley. In the taxi I send him a single period, imagining his reaction. Mistake or meaning? A pip of dust on the screen? But there is no reply, no indecisive ellipsis. Nothing. And I'm briefly worried for Bob. Is he doing all right in the big city? I arrive at the restaurant early. It's near Tania's apartment. I had hoped she was going to invite me over beforehand so I could get a glimpse of her life, but she had insisted on just meeting here — so here I am, drinking sparkling water when what I want is vodka. The restaurant seems to cater to the solo diner. Framed museum posters cover the walls. Sheets of white paper stand in for tablecloths. Having a reservation feels somewhat humiliating. This is hardly the special night I had imagined. Plus I'm a picky eater.

For distraction, I take the Sachem from my shoulder bag. The inside cover tells me the yearbook belonged to Paul Fatone. I have no recollection of Paul Fatone. His photograph sparks nothing but another assault of hairstyle molded against white suburban face. But Paul Fatone must have been popular. There are scrawls everywhere from fellow seniors, the innocuous words of teenagers using the lingo of the day. They inscribe their parting gibes as though on a piece of novelty tombstone, the earth beneath forever summer. I search for a few old flames. Nathan Lobo. Bill Ferguson. Toby Stankowski. None of them lasted for more than a month before they disappointed me, and while I gave myself easily — Ryan Feller took my virginity in ninth grade — I departed just as easily and enjoyed the notion of their pining, even enjoyed the gossip afterward. I

liked being talked about even if every word stung. And I would give my own details to the girls, how the boys' dicks were small and their performance sweaty and quick, how the only good part was when they let me harvest the pimples on their backs. And then I would go and screw another boy to further remove meaning. It was free love but with a nihilistic stain. On page 75 I come across my only close girlfriend, Sally Gimble. By graduation she was no longer speaking to me, which was fine since I knew from the beginning we had an expiration date. A few years ago I searched for her on Facebook. She still lives in Massapequa and is married with two sons. I didn't bother with the friend request. Her boys looked like rapists.

The front door of the restaurant opens and I see Tania —my Tania, my baby girl, right there. The sight of her fills me to the tips of my fingers and toes. It's like I have ballast again. I straighten and lift my chin toward the light of our reunion. She must see me — I can see her, but first she says hello to the maître d', this French crone, the two of them exchanging a European-style kiss. I wonder how often Tania eats here. Does she have her normal spot at the bar, where Jules or Mauriceor Emile serves her too sweet white wine? Tania and the crone laugh, Tania with her hand on the crone's shoulder. I want to wave but I won't. I'll let her have this moment. Tania looks the same and yet different since I saw her five years ago: the Christmas visit before she went to San Francisco for New Year's. Just two days with me during which half the time she was sleeping. And I gave her wonderful gifts. She gave me a scarf. Tania seems more middle-aged now. Rounder. Her hair has remained short but is dyed a brighter lollipop red. She looks like her father if her father was transitioning to a woman. Her fashion sense appears based on taking long flights — loosefitting clothes, sandals, a backpack. A walk through a security checkpoint seems implied. There are probably two paperbacks in that backpack. And a *Playbill* for a matinee. And some sort of sour candy loose from its wrapper, shedding its dust. And a gratitude journal where she keeps track of what she's thankful for, from friends to foods to television shows to masturbating in the bathtub. There's no Mom in there — oh, and catalogs of dreams, conscious and unconscious, described over endless pages. I almost feel sorry for her. She's probably speaking bad French right now.

Tania finally breaks free from the front of the restaurant and comes toward me. Her smile tightens, withholding the fullness of expression, no doubt because I am her mother, and so I offer her the same expression in return. I remain seated and formal. Like a great-aunt. Because this is what she wants. I notice her quick examination of my face — the wrinkles and age spots, the blondish scars on my nose and forehead from the basal cell carcinoma. I feel tattooed by those eyes. She still refuses to pluck those black hairs from that mole on her chin. I have tweezers in my bag, but I'll refrain from saying anything.

"Mom," she says, spreading her arms, "you're here!" She was once a child actress.

"Hello, sweetheart," I say.

"Back in the big city," she says as she takes her seat.

"Well, first time I've been invited," I say.

Tania does that Tania thing with her lips. "How was the event?" she asks.

"It was a convention," I say.

"Right, horror movie stuff," she says.

"Well, yes, all sorts of cinema really, and people were very excited we were there. It really was something. You should've come. A bigger crowd than I imagined. Lines and lines of people. My hand is wrecked from signing things," I tell her, showing her my hand.

"Very cool," Tania says. "And was it fun seeing everyone from the cast again?"

"Not really," I say. "Charlie Mooks sells insurance."

"Who's he again?" Tania asks.

"The killer," I say.

"Right right right," Tania says.

"He's even more disgusting today," I say.

"Oh," Tania says.

"And everyone just seems so old," I say, "including myself."

"Please," Tania says, who seems almost older than me.

"And even worse," I tell her, "we had to watch ourselves during the screening, up there on the big screen, when we were all so young and beautiful and worthy enough to be slaughtered by a madman."

Tania grins.

"What?" I ask.

"That's funny," she says.

"Maybe you can't understand," I say.

Tania sits back in her chair. "Yeah, maybe," she says.

"It's just strange," I say, "seeing ourselves all fresh-faced and pert. It's like watching an old home movie but with horrible graphic violence."

"Uh-huh," Tania says.

"Anyway, it was a long hellish day. Literally. Like I saw visions from hell." I glance around the restaurant and cannot help the next line — it's practically dictated by inevitable forces. "Speaking of hell, do you enjoy this neighborhood? Because when I lived in the city it was all about downtown. SoHo. East Village. The Upper West Side was considered, I don't know, sleepy and dull," I say.

Tania readjusts her napkin. "Don't think that's changed much," she says.

"I remember——"

The waiter shows up. He places his hand on Tania's shoulder and Tania beams.

"Hello, beautiful," he says.

"*Bonsoir,* George," Tania says.

I'm almost embarrassed for her.

"Where have you been hiding, my lovely?" George asks. He must be in his late 50s and he's attractive in the way waiters can sometimes be attractive: attentive and clean and conscious of posture and purpose. He has a mustache, which I normally hate, except on the rare occasion when they transcend my bias and become mysteriously powerful. George has such a mustache.

"Traveling," Tania tells him.

"To exotic lands?" George asks.

"Buffalo," Tania says.

I smile at Tania; I smile at George; I smile at Tania and George.

"I hear it's magical this time of year," George says.

"I did see Niagara Falls," Tania says.

"And?" George asks.

"Pretty great. Went on the *Maid of the Mist,*" Tania says.

I keep smiling, at Tania, at George, at Tania and George.

"Is there a better name?" George says. *"Maid of the Mist,"* he repeats with a flourish.

"It was beyond," Tania says. "The sound. The power. Like a glacier but all movement."

"A glacier moves," George says.

"But very slowly," Tania says.

"Until all at once," George says, making a calving gesture with his hands.

Finally Tania notices me, or remembers I'm in this scene as well.

"George," she says, "this is my mother."

George turns to me. "Hello, Tania's mother," he says.

"Zoe," I say.

George's mustache arches like an eyebrow. "Ah, Greek for life," he says.

"Yes," I say, though I never trust when service people know these kinds of things, or I find the idea of their deeper knowledge somewhat unsettling. It's like seeing someone handsome who works on a road crew — it does not jibe with my worldview.

"So what are the specials, George?" I ask, sticking to the menu.

"The specials?" George asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Everything is special," George says with inclusive gusto.

"Okay, great, but what are the specials really?" I ask again.

"Just what's on the menu," George says. "The lamb is very good."

Tania blushes. I'm guessing she's a regular consumer of the lamb.

Tania tilts her head. "What?" she asks.

"Is he your boyfriend?" I repeat because I'm stubborn with the newfound attention.

"Um, no," Tania says, "he's not my boyfriend."

"It's just, he's cute," I say.

"Stop," Tania says.

"I thought you two had some repartee," I say.

"Can we change the subject?" Tania asks.

"You obviously get along."

"Stop," Tania says.

"Okay," I say as though uncertain of the ground rules. "So, Niagara Falls…."

"And not that either," Tania says.

And so begins the back-and-forth of mothers and daughters immemorial. Everything I ask is too personal; everything I say is too banal to warrant a proper response. And Tania gives me the minimum, mostly yeses and nos and a few spare details — her job, her friends, her rescue dog — which hardly defrays the general sense of sadness and loneliness I imagine from her life. The poor girl. She speaks as if she has a lawyer present, glancing to the side when I pose basic questions, seeking, it seems, counsel from David Hockney at MoMA. And she can barely muster any curiosity about my own day-to-day existence and instead seeks confirmation of the same old, same old, as though I'm not real, as though I am merely someone in prosthetics acting as her mother. And she

I NEED FRESH AIR. I NEED ESCAPE. I HAVE NO BYGONE FONDNESS FOR THESE PEOPLE. I'M LIKE A PAIR OF SCISSORS SAYING GOOD-BYE.

"I'll have the lamb then," I say, handing back the menu.

Tania looks surprised. "We're doing this already?" she asks.

"Why not?" I say. "George is here, and he seems ready and capable and even eager, and it's been a long day, and I'm hungry, and I hear the lamb is very good, and that's just fine by me. Oh, and I'll have another sparkling water as well and maybe some bread."

"Okay," George says. "And you, Tania?"

"Um, I guess I'll have the chicken paillard," she says. "And I'll stick with regular water."

"Excellent," George says, and he executes a shallow bow before leaving.

There's a moment of post-ordering silence before I say, "He seems nice."

"Uh-huh," Tania says.

"You come here often?" I ask.

"Enough," Tania says.

"Is he maybe your boyfriend?" I ask, which I know is a supremely foolish thing to ask, and yet the words are released before I can do anything, spoken from this voice within my voice, like a stage prompt from the wings.

once adored me. Would practically dress up as me. I flatten in the chair. Whatever misguided enthusiasm is leaking away, moldering and stale, like my love is just the reek of my own breath.

"Have you seen your father?" I ask, raising the stakes, but i need fuller consideration.

"Of course not," Tania says.

"I was just wondering," I say, "since you're both in the city."

"Why would I see him?" she asks.

"I don't know. Don't blame me for that," I say.

"I don't want to see him," Tania says. "At all. Like never."

"Okay," I say.

At some point George appears with the food.

"Here's the lamb. And the chicken," he says.

I look up at him and say, "I'm curious, George, are you married?"

Tania tightens from across the table.

"No," George says.

"Never?" I ask.

Tania leans forward. I am finally fully present in her eyes.

"I'm a widower," George says.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. When did your wife die?" I ask.

"Um, Mom," Tania says.

George smiles despite himself. "About three years ago," he says.

"And how did she die, if you don't mind me asking?" I ask.

"Mom," Tania says again.

George nods like a boat on waves. "Cancer," he says,

"Mom," Tania says, "stop."

"There's no shame in this," I say to her. "Just an honest and open conversation, right, George? I myself am a survivor. Basal cell carcinoma." I point to the various divots on my face. "And a nasty squamous cell carcinoma on my back. Fair skin and a love of bikinis, not a good combination. Certainly not the same, of course, not by a long shot, but still gets you thinking. I also had a thyroid scare last year. I don't know if I told you that, Tania."

"Enough," Tania says.

"It was in her brain," George says. "Or started there."

"How horrible for you," I say.

"Yes, well, mostly horrible for her," George says, his head back on the shore.

"I can't imagine," I say, though I can.

"Anyway," George says, "bon appétit," which rings hollow yet true.

"Yes, thank you, George," I say. "Looks delicious. Thank you."

I regard the lamb in front of me. I hate lamb.

In five minutes, maybe six, Tania will get up and leave. I know this like I know she can sometimes cry so hard that she'll vomit. Like I know she can hold her breath almost to the point of fainting. Like I know she can stay locked in the bathroom until the fire department has to be called. Her face is reddening now. Blotches appear on her neck and chest, like her skin is litmus paper and I am the test. She never could hide anything from me. She holds her knife and fork like handlebars and she's speeding downhill, reckless and strong-willed, running away from home again. I notice the votive candle on the table flickering. George has forgotten the bread. I start in on the lamb, cutting and then inspecting the meat. It's like I'm performing an autopsy. I realize there's a specific word for what the flame is doing, which suddenly seems important to remember. Flicker, flutter, shiver, shudder. I keep my eyes focused on the plate, on the growing pile of excised meat. All of the restaurant seems constituted around our silence and the predestined end of our silence. We are the main event. Twinkle, sparkle, glimmer. I sound like a witch in my head. If only Tania knew how much I loved her. Gutter — the flame is guttering. That's when I look up and give Tania a satisfied smile. I never even had the chance to mention the yearbook.

• • •

The bar at the hotel is hardly full, which is both a relief and a disappointment, and yet the bartender lingers on the opposite end, chatting with others while I embarrass myself with a series of meaningful glances. Perhaps he's trying to instill some dismissive cool onto the place. Because otherwise this could be a New York–themed restaurant in Des Moines. And the lighting is beyond hideous. My pores seem possessed by lampreys, angry and alive, sucking up the fluorescence. I'm sure everyone can hear my skin scream. But nobody turns toward me, not even the nearby older gentleman in his dated pinstripe suit. He's around my age. His hair is thinning and slicked back, his scalp vaguely corpse-like. Forty years ago his attention would've angled toward me in a near instant. Shoulders followed by head followed by eyes. The testing of the space between us. The unavoidable hello. But he's only interested in his phone, and I'm still waiting for the bartender. Billy Joel plays on the stereo. Then the Ramones. It's as though the playlist has been created by a schizophrenic New Yorker.

I take a deep breath, which spurs an extravagant yawn.

I imagine a pair of clear blue eyes peering from my throat.

"Fuck," I say as I finish the yawn.

The older gentleman looks at me.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck," I say.

He extends me a thumbs-up and returns to his phone.

Once again I glance down the bar.

Does the bartender think I already have a drink?

I reach into my bag and grab the *Sachem* — the goddamn Sachem, and I find myself sort of laughing, because it's been a long and impossible day and here I am in this hotel bar listening to "I Wanna Be Sedated" and as far as I can tell I barely exist in this world. I open the yearbook and find Zoe Akeldama. I should sign the thing already. *For Bob. Dear Bob. Sweet Bob.* And though I have a pen in my bag, I think about asking the older gentleman for one, just to confirm my reality. Oh, excuse me, sir. My mother once told me she would have named me Athena if she had known just how beautiful I would become. So typical that she had gotten the goddess wrong. But her life was so meager. The dental hygienist. The first-generation American. The paltry success story. Zoe Akeldama would have gotten a drink here no problem. And whatever drug she wanted. And a weekend trip to someplace warm. And a stupid role in a stupid movie, which was always the stupid dream. I carefully rip the page from the yearbook, like removing a check from a checkbook. The older gentleman looks at me again. I smile and ball the piece of paper and toss it in the direction of the bartender. It hardly causes a stir.

"That was me," I tell the older gentleman.

His extends me another thumbs-up and returns to his phone.

This is New York, I think. This is me in New York. This is me sitting here in New York.

I look at my hands. Always a mistake.

I'm tempted to grab my tweezers and work on random knuckle hairs but instead I pick up my phone.

No new texts; no new e-mails.

Nothing.

Four middle-aged women enter the bar, probably 20 years younger than me. They seem to be celebrating something, their festivity instantly grating. They semaphore whooping with their arms. No doubt they will all order cosmopolitans and be further transformed.

I think about Bob. I think about Bob roaming the streets in his fedora and faux machete, playing the character he always wanted to be, but the tall buildings are almost overwhelming, the crowds and the lights, the sudden sounds, all the fears greater than any moth streaking toward him in the moonlight. And yet Bob persists, Bob does the sights, Bob eats a pretzel and a hot dog, Bob goes into Madame Tussauds and poses next to Freddy Krueger and Frank Sinatra, Bob navigates these mysterious scenes and wonders where all these people live and how they live and what they do for a living, Bob assuming he's the only stranger here, the only audience member to this curious show. Then he gets three texts in quick succession. Like whispers through a crannied hole.

"Come to Room 2024."

"Come right now."

"I have what you want." ■

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